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SEPTEMBER 2018 • ₹150 • VOL. 7 ISSUE 3 • NATGEOTRAVELLER.IN

# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA



## HIGHWAY COMPANION

AMAZING ROAD TRIPS WORTH EVERY MINUTE



MONGOLIA | CALIFORNIA | GREECE | QUEENSLAND | IRELAND | BARCELONA

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA

# SEPTEMBER 2018

VOL. 7 ISSUE 3



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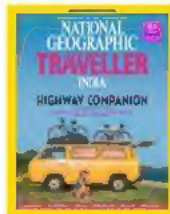
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Fingers on the wheel, wind whipping your hair out of whack, perhaps Jim Morrison on the stereo, nudging you to keep your eyes on the

road. Road trips do promise a real good time. In this picture, **Marjan Apostolovic** captures the thrill of chasing the journey, not the destination—possibly an idea shared by the young woman taking a break from hitting the road in her sunshine minivan. Let it roll, we say.





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that will urge readers to create their own memorable trips... and  
come back with their own amazing stories.

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# SLOW DAYS, FAST COMPANY

ROAD TRIPS ARE  
NOT TRAILERS. THEY  
ARE MOVIES WHICH  
FILL THE GAPS  
IN PLACES YOU  
THINK YOU KNOW

In the mid-2000s, I had the first of my several brushes with unemployment. This was no well-considered sabbatical. Instead it was a surprise shove that came out of nowhere. Losing a job is crushing but even more so if you are the only one. In the company of a few colleagues though, your shoulders droop less and the gloom takes on a lightheaded spin. You cloak despair in disdain, adopting a "What, me worry?" face. And then, you blot the world, and travel.

So I accompanied one of my friends back to her hometown, Guwahati, where I was to join her mum and dad on a road journey to Shillong, and if the weather held steady, onward to Cherrapunji. The choice of Cherrapunji puzzled me initially for as far as I could tell, it was that place where it rained constantly. There were enough clouds hanging over me, I thought to myself.

But since my arrival, my friend's father, who is no more, had been keen on us travelling by road. He was a looming presence, with a fondness for fine booze and house parties. I remember that trip now in snatches—Guwahati (quiet and hilly), Shillong (cool long before cool was invented), homemade khao suey, bootleg liquor shacks along the border between Assam and Meghalaya, and a worn-out CD of Vivaldi in the car.

The overwhelming memory I have though is of the Shillong-Guwahati highway, where locals peered out of tin-roofed houses and roadside shops hid culinary delights I had never encountered. And my host, stepping on the gas as if his modest SUV were an Italian speed monster. Driving unfettered always unleashed his inner outlaw, my friend would recall later. For a young me, he held an invigorating promise: Old age was fun and wild provided there were more road trips.

Often, the way the world travels now—take a flight and run down a list of experiences—feels as if we are settling for watching trailers instead of entire movies. Road trips fill the gaps in places you think you know.

That's why NGTI always celebrates a breadth of road experiences. Some, featured in this issue, are familiar, like a bike ride through the outskirts of Barcelona, a family holiday in Australia and a jaunt through ancient Greece. Others, like a van ride through Mongolia and a illustrator's perspective of the Californian coast, are utterly singular.

The best part about road trips? They are versatile. They can be joyous in the company of family and friends, and if you are lonesome, you can rely on the road to always keep you company. 🚗

## OUR MISSION

National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling, inspiring readers to create their own journeys and return with amazing stories. Our distinctive yellow rectangle is a window into a world of unparalleled discovery.



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# SWIMMING IN TROUBLED WATERS

**A MAIDEN SNORKELLING ADVENTURE  
DIVES DEEP INTO QUESTIONS OF  
RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL**



**B**reathe in, breathe out. Wait. Breathe through your mouth. Look at the fish! Do NOT touch the coral.

My mind whirled trying to remember the instructions; my body struggled to follow. Panic set in. I couldn't breathe. Waves crashed over me as I tried to adjust my mask, filling my orifices with salty water. Something didn't feel right, and there was no trained guide with me. I began stepping and stumbling on coral. Colourful fish darted past, making room for the newcomer flailing about in their waters.

\*\*\*

In June, I visited Maldives, famous for its resorts, stunning coral reefs and promise of paradise. From the seaplane I spotted hues of blue I'd only seen in a colour wheel. Waves rolled about hither and thither, interrupted by reefs, sandbars and the occasional island. I quickly jotted down: the ocean has stretch marks. I couldn't wait to see the two fancy resorts I'd been booked in over six days, and jump right in.

\*\*\*

Swimming in the ocean is very different from being in a pool, especially when your fin-shod feet no longer touch the ground and the tide turns stronger. In my case, add to this a snorkelling mask worn wrong, no life jacket, and no certified guide; what you get is what I termed my own *Series of Unfortunate Events*. Only this time, more than my safety was at stake: every time I stumbled over the shallow, abundant reef, I killed a portion of it. Walking or standing on coral damages the polyps which build it, affecting an entire ecosystem.

I wish I could say that this happened only once, but my first two swims were trial and error. I did learn to be more careful each

time, and when I checked into the second resort, I insisted on trained snorkelling guides. But my guilt had adulterated the joy of the ocean's magical discovery. Both resorts prided themselves on the luxury they offered guests. Both had rich house reefs teeming with fish, reef sharks, and even turtles. But the ground reality? Scores of people, young and old, fumbling in water, thinking they could snorkel/swim, inadvertently destroying fragile ecosystems. Guided snorkelling trips cost extra, and had fixed timings, which meant that guests could simply forgo them.

Being able to experience how 71 per cent of the planet lives is an eye-opening journey, one that made me want to learn how to scuba dive. But it also made me question how we travel: what does being a responsible traveller mean? Can I breathe easy if the damage done by me was inadvertent? Or should I also have stopped others from making the same mistakes? With whom does the responsibility lie? I appreciated how the hotels' staff kept the waters and beaches clean, but weren't the reefs part of the maintenance too? My doubts run amok, but one thing I know—the next time I snorkel, I will be far more careful of where I do it, and with whom.

\*\*\*

I faced a similar dilemma a couple of years ago, on a trip to Kasol, Himachal Pradesh. It was choking with six-hour traffic jams at New Year's Eve. From afar, the slice of mountains dotted with pine trees looked perfect. The town overlooks the crystal-blue Parvati River, which sparkled in the winter sun. But reality hits as you inch closer—overtourism, litter, and pollution of all sorts: plastic, bonfires, and Punjabi

music. The few treks I went on in Kasol told the same tale. Local effort was overrun by the sheer magnitude of careless tourists. At that point, simply not littering was not good enough.

All is not lost though. Illustrator Indu Harikumar says she is aware that the mere act of getting on an airplane contributes to pollution. But she tries to make up in the little things. On her last trek in the Western Ghats, she collected the litter along the way. "Just being more careful about the environment helps. I carry *dabbas* to keep leftovers, always keep a bottle of water, and use eco-friendly sanitary napkins."

In 2012, Indiahikes, an Indian company that organises Himalayan treks, started their Green Trails initiative. Helmed by Lakshmi Selvakumaran, the initiative has collected over 30,000 kilos of inorganic waste from the mountains since 2016. "We don't do clean-up treks—all our treks are green," she explains. Green Trails involves composting biodegradable waste, rainwater harvesting, building deep pit sawdust toilets for treks, and helping villagers and *dhabawallas* with waste management. And, no bonfires. All trekkers are aware of the rules; many come especially to volunteer. Selvakumaran puts it best: "Travel not only without leaving a trace, but also undo previous damage." 🌱



**LUBNA AMIR**  
travels in search of happy places (which invariably involve a beach) and good food. She works as Junior Assistant Editor at NGT India and is always planning her next big escape.

PHOTO COURTESY LUBNA AMIR



# A STREET CALLED SERENDIPITY

**WHAT IS SO SPECIAL ABOUT ROAD TRIPS? FOR SOME, IT IS THE THRILL OF HAPPY ACCIDENTS**



I spend a lot of time on the road. It began because of the obvious convenience. Driving allowed me to be free of the schedule of flight or train services. I could pack as much as I liked without worrying about luggage limits. So the question of five books or one Kindle stopped mattering so much. All of it, was the answer, every single time. And there was also the fact that when I drove around in Germany, it was educational. If I was going to spend the foreseeable future calling the place home, I decided that I'd best learn as much about the country as I could. Travelling by road seemed a good way to do it, especially with the chance to drive on the Autobahn being too alluring a prospect to turn down.

But there were other reasons too. My husband Ronny and I were newlyweds, who really would have liked to spend more time with each other, but couldn't. Freelancing kept both of us busy, and often took us to far corners of the country (sometimes the world) without each other. And we discovered, upon peering closely at the calendar, that we often weren't at home at the same time. The obvious solution, it seemed, was to accompany each other on our work trips. Instead of having to spend twice on flights, we'd just load up the car, and drive all over the place. Along the way we discovered more about each other than we would have closeted in our apartment for a lifetime. We had long conversations about life, the universe and everything in between. We exchanged confidences. We laughed. And when we were exceedingly tired, or hungry, we snapped at each other. But mostly, we laughed. And, when one of us got tired of being behind the wheel, we'd simply swap. When both of us were

sleepy we'd just pull into a rest stop off the highway, recline the seats and take a nap. Oh, driving certainly taught us a lot.

But when I think about why I insist on driving endlessly, often preferring it to other modes of travel, I think of one winter morning in Sweden.

We'd been driving for approximately two and a half hours when I spotted the signboard. For a second, I didn't quite believe that I'd seen what I had, so I stayed quiet. Then, I shook myself out of the stupor and said to my husband. "There's a Buddhist temple nearby." He wasn't convinced, believing it was my imagination tricking me into seeing signboards amidst

**I'VE MADE A LIFELONG FRIEND ON A ROAD TRIP THAT I DIDN'T WANT TO GO ON TO BEGIN WITH**

the snow. But he still turned that giant van that we were driving around, and headed back a few hundred metres. And sure enough, there it was.

Amidst the endless expanse of snowy roads in Fredricka, north Sweden, was a tiny blue board with two colourful prayer flags fluttering behind it. It said 'Buddham Temple.' A little arrow pointed into a white lane that we proceeded to drive down. We found there a little temple that looked like it was a mixture of both Swedish and Tibetan architecture. Any place of contemplation has the effect of making one grow quiet. But I think this had an added element of surprise to it, because we really weren't expecting to find a

Buddhist temple in the faraway land. I was quieter than usual, watching snowflakes fall gently to the ground, with the temple in the background. It seemed like time had come to a halt. Suddenly I felt Ronny entwine his fingers around my frozen digits, as we stood there together feeling like two travellers who had chanced upon a secret place, hidden away from the world outside. It remains one of my favourite accidental discoveries from my travels on the road.

And it's not the only one.

I've taken a wrong turn in Mallorca, and stumbled upon the best view of the azure Mediterranean that I've ever seen. I've pulled into a parking lot in Sweden, in search of a restroom, only to discover that I was in a candy store (in the very town that invented the iconic red-and-white candy cane) straight out of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. And I've made a lifelong friend on a road trip that I didn't want to go on to begin with.

I know today, the real reason that I choose road trips over any other type of journey is the hope for more serendipitous discoveries. The sort of things that give me the feeling that I've found something no one else has ever before. A little secret that travelling has, in that moment, brought me, and me alone. 🌟



**VAISHALI DINAKARAN**

is a Berlin-based writer and journalist. She and her husband like to drive around Europe, often for no reason other than that there are roads.

VAISHALI DINAKARAN



# THE ITINERARY

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### THE CAIRO CHALLENGE

72 hours of churches, ruins and chic cafés in the desert Egyptian city



MERYDOLLA/SHUTTERSTOCK

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# BEST LIST: 25 UNSUNG INDIAN HERITAGE GEMS

AT MANY OF THESE HISTORICALLY SIGNIFICANT SPOTS, YOU MIGHT BE THE ONLY TOURIST IN SIGHT. BUT THAT'S JUST THE WAY THIS AUTHOR PREFERS IT **BY ZAC O'YEAH**

## DHOLAVIRA, GUJARAT

*217 km east of Bhuj airport*

A vast site from the Harappan era, set on a spectacular island far out in the salt marshes of the Rann of Kutch, Dholavira provides a rare opportunity to stroll alone through one of civilisation's greatest ancient cities, abandoned four millennia ago. See how our ancestors lived, with well-engineered sewage tunnels, tiled bath cubicles, and kitchens with grinding stones. Prehistoric mixies, anyone?

## AIHOLE, KARNATAKA

*40 km east from Badami railway station; buses run to Aihole village; Nearest airport: Belgaum (157 km)*

This village adjoining the stunning hillside cave temples of Badami and the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Pattadakal is easily overlooked, but Aihole's intriguing experimental rock-cut temples suggest that this was a laboratory of sacred architecture. Referred to as the cradle of Indian temple design, in its heyday the village had hundreds of arts teachers.

## KAUSAMBI, UTTAR PRADESH

*51 km west of Allahabad railway station; Nearest airport: Varanasi (175 km)*

The wondrous Kausambi is mentioned in the Ramayana, and the Buddha lectured here post-enlightenment. It was born as a Vedic capital, rose to glory over a thousand years, then vanished. It was rediscovered, replete with ruins of palaces, monasteries and city walls. There's no signposting—the finds are in the museums of Allahabad.

## GANGAIKONDACHOLAPURAM, TAMIL NADU

*35 km north from Kumbakonam railway station; Nearest airport: Tiruchirappalli (144 km)*

Of all of India's hallowed heritage grounds, my favourite is the slightly out-of-the-way, 1,000-year-old, 180-foot-tall Gangaikondacholeeswaram temple. Still a simple functioning temple, it's perhaps the finest example of Chola architectural art and the only surviving monument of the capital built by a Tamil king who ruled from here and up

to the Ganges, which is the meaning of the name Gangaikondacholapuram.

## MARBLE PALACE, WEST BENGAL

*14 km from Kolkata airport; Nearest metro station: M. G. Road; Get permission from the West Bengal Tourism Information Bureau at BBD Bagh in advance*

Tucked inside a narrow street in crowded north Kolkata, this neoclassical mansion was built in the mid-1830s by obsessive collector Raja Rajendra Mullick and crammed with paintings, statues, Victorian furniture, Chinese urns, and other treasures from almost a hundred different countries. It provides a rare glimpse into India's globalised past and the colonial world.

## NAGGAR CASTLE, HIMACHAL PRADESH

*35 km north of Kulu-Manali airport*

A dramatic 15th-century castle 6,500 feet high up on the hillside, where the Kulu kings used to live, it affords a royal view of the Beas River and its surroundings. Painter Nicholas Roerich

The Gangaikondacholeeswaram temple in Gangaikondacholapuram, Tamil Nadu, is one of the finest examples of Chola architectural art.









Sikkim's Rumtek monastery is a slice of Shangri-La. An assemblage of daily use artefacts patterned from across India crowd the Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum.

Churchyard give the place a distinctive 17th-century vintage vibe.

*11 km from Delhi airport; Nearest metro station: Hauz Khas*

Begumpuri Masjid is both Delhi's second largest mosque and the most forgotten sight. It's with a sense of wonder that one walks about alone in the imposing complex probably constructed for Firoz Shah Tughlaq, sultan of Delhi and enthusiastic builder, circa 1370 after he founded the fifth city of Delhi. His tomb is nearby at Hauz Khas (where he also built a madrasa).

*About 7.5 km south of Pondicherry railway station; Nearest airport: Chennai (155 km)*

This site counts as one of the great archaeological discoveries—a Roman shopping centre in India. Shards of Mediterranean amphorae from Arikamedu (on display at

the Pondicherry museum) provided invaluable information on India's ancient relations with the West. Onsite visitors get an idea of the lay of the land thanks to, local lad Ramesh, who often volunteers to show people around.

*13 km from Gwalior airport*

What would mathematics be without the zero? No computers. The number was invented in India more than 1,500 years ago. This possibly oldest surviving actual symbol for the numeral can be seen on a plaque in the tiny ninth-century Chaturbhuj Temple which is carved out of the rockface beneath Gwalior's majestic fort.



*Trains between Pune and Manmad stop at Ahmednagar; Nearest airport: Pune (120 km)*

The more than 500-year-old Ahmednagar has mosques, palaces, and Aurangzeb's

original tomb, but more than anything else I was humbled by the pre-Mughal fort with its tall walls where Jawaharlal Nehru was interned during the second World War. This was where the man who would later become prime minister wrote *The Discovery of India*.

*Near the Sariska Tiger Reserve; Nearest airport: Jaipur (90 km)*

Said to be one of the most haunted spots in India, Bhangarh is an abandoned ancient city. Legend has it that it was the fallout of a curse uttered by a dying tantrik, after his advances were spurned by a princess who accidentally crushed him with a boulder. Another less fairy-tale explanation is that people left after a famine in 1783. Strictly no entry after sunset.

*Buses ply along the highway between Kozhikode and Mysore; Nearest airport: Kozhikode (100 km)*

Sulthan Bathery or Sultan's Battery, a town nestled in greenery at 3,000 feet above sea level, is where most visitors alight the bus to go to Wayanad's plantation homestays. Named after one

of Tipu's military bases, it is ancient: there's a 13th-century Jain temple (in which the sultan kept his ammo) as well as prehistoric cave art uphill at Edakkal. Getting to the caves is a bit of a trek but worth it to see rock paintings that supposedly date back to 6000 B.C.

*Rent a taxi for a full-day tour; Nearest airport: Bhubaneswar (90 km)*

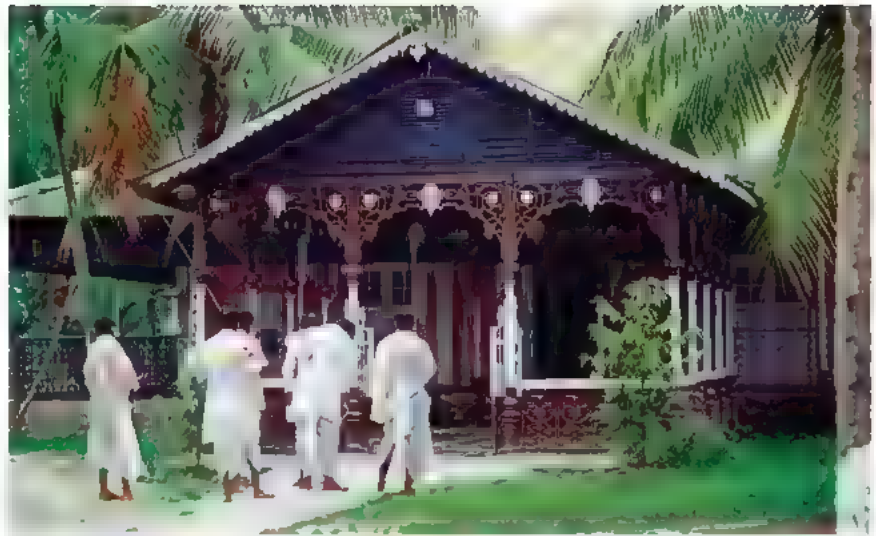
One of my most exciting taxi drives took me through Odisha to check out ruins dating back to approximately fifth century, from the once thriving Buddhist civilisation hereabouts. Known as Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri respectively, the hilly sites are hard to access by public transport, hence one is left virtually alone in the ruined monasteries full of lovely architectural details. And picturesque views.

*1.6-km walk north of Churu railway station; The hotel is open for non-staying visitors at fixed hours*

Among the thousands of painted havelis of the Shekhawati region, this is a gem. Many others are locked up, but this marzipan mansion is where an art lover can spend a night, staring at the painted ceilings until sleep overcomes. I recommend suite number 205, a Rajasthani version of the Sistine Chapel.

*18 km from Delhi airport; Nearest metro station: Chawri Bazaar*

While it isn't perhaps as impressive



The Vaishnavite Satras of Majuli (top) are known for their rich arts and crafts traditions including mask making; Ghalib ki Haveli (bottom) in Delhi is a pilgrimage for any poetry lover.

as it ought to be—since much of the building has been taken over by sundry businesses—a portion of Ghalib ki Haveli is now a museum open to visitors who want to get close to the great poet of the Mughal world. Here Ghalib breathed his last in 1869, so any poetry lover should make the pilgrimage, and nearby one can feast on some delectable old town chaat.

*8 km from Ujjain station; Nearest airport: Indore (62 km)*

This 15th-century Persian style palace stands on an island in the Shipra river north of the Gupta era

city of Ujjain. It is where novelist E.M. Forster came to walk in the footsteps of Kalidasa—who, unfortunately, didn't stay in this palace as he died a thousand years before it was built. But Emperor Akbar did stay here. For places where Kalidasa may have spent time, head to the Bharthari caves and its neighbouring Gadkalika temple.

*65 km west of Ranchi airport; rent a taxi for a full day*

A jungle outpost set up on the Chhota Nagpur plateau as a cooperative retirement village for Anglo-Indians, McCluskieganj survived as an English utopia into post-colonial India. Remnants linger—crumbling guest houses, churches and graveyards. An elderly gent told me that pop star Cliff Richard's aunt used to live in the bungalow across from his. Do not stay after nightfall, as the jungles get unsafe.

*4 km northwest of Vidisha railway station. Nearest airport: Bhopal (66 km)*

Vidisha was the native place of Emperor Ashoka's first wife Devi. It's now overshadowed by the nearby UNESCO site of Sanchi, yet it holds treasures. Rent a bicycle and head out into the fields to find a historically significant sandstone pillar next to a Hindu temple erected by a Greek in the mid-second century B.C. ★







## GLUTTONOUS IN GEORGIA

EATING THROUGH THIS EURASIAN NATION BRINGS SURPRISES WITH EVERY PLATE, AND A GLASS OF WINE IS ALWAYS NEARBY

The bowl of soup in front of me wasn't much to look at—dense yellow egg-and-chicken broth garnished with bits of roughly chopped wild mint. It looks more like whisked eggs ready to be made into an omelette. But looks can be deceptive for the *chikhirtma*. The popular Georgian dish has a creamy richness and hearty flavours of meat, and a tangy kick of lemon and mint in the end.

A meal of *chikhirtma*, served with a side of pan-fried cornbread called *mchadi* and pickled vegetables including carrots, beet and seasonal wild garlic, was my introduction to Georgian cuisine. Over the next 10 days that I spent in the Georgian capital Tbilisi, and the coastal city of Batumi, I ate meal after meal guided not by online reviews but only my hunger pangs. Though rich in dairy and meat, it features a vast selection of local legumes and vegetables

that are foraged seasonally, pickled, or freshly cooked. The flavours and ingredients of Georgian food, along with a wine culture and an industry that is slowly making a mark globally, reflect its geography—straddling Asia and the Mediterranean, squeezed between Russia, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Black Sea.

The tiny Eurasian country of about four million people has managed to preserve its provincial food culture despite being under Soviet occupation for close to 70 years. By design, Georgia has largely escaped the clutches of industrial food production because scaling up is simply unviable to support the country's tiny population and its unique food culture. Georgians are proud of the fact that their food is natural and organic.

Throughout my trip, I had wolfed down supple, cheese-filled bread boats

called *khachapuris*, devoured juicy meat-filled dumplings or *khinkalis*, chewed on *churchkheles*—a type of Georgian candy, made of grape must, nuts and flour—and drank glasses of house wine at restaurants in Tbilisi and Batumi, about six hours southwest of Tbilisi. Soon, I could confidently order anything on the menu without having to ask the waiter to explain.

Nevertheless, Georgian gastronomy continued to surprise me, especially with its farm-to-table simplicity and abundance of foraged, seasonal ingredients. The balmy morning of the eighth day of my trip found me along with a bunch of tourists at the nerve-centre of the city's culinary scene, the Deserter's Bazaar in Central Tbilisi, on a food



BEESENKOV/SHUTTERSTOCK (BARRY PRATHAPNAR TOUJ)



Though *churchkhelas* (left), or Georgian candy, were traditionally made with grape juice, modern versions include pomegranate and kiwi flavours: The wine accompanying the traditional long Georgian meals (right) is usually made by locals at home.

tour organised by Culinary Backstreets. A warren of warehouse sheds with tin roofs, Deserter's supplies meat, dairy and vegetables to the restaurants around Tbilisi. Our group was led by Californian journalist Paul Rimple, who moonlights as the frontman of a local blues band, and has been living in Tbilisi since 2002. He chatted with the sellers about their wares in fluent Georgian, relaying their answers to us in English. All around, there seemed to be harmony in the market's chaos, vendors peddled everything from spices, Georgian wild asparagus, heaps of tarragon, pickled vegetables, green sour plums, and curly shoots of wild spinach to cheese, *matsioni* yogurt, and whole suckling pigs. The tour ended with a sampling of local wine from plastic canisters before we headed to *Vino Underground*, a wine bar in the upscale Sololaki neighbourhood of Old Tbilisi.

In the basement bar, stacked with over 500 kinds of wine from around the country, we sipped unfiltered Georgian wine. My white wine, made from *Tsolikouri* grapes in the Imereti region, was citrusy with a dense mouthfeel. "It's a gamble to keep the natural wine for longer. Since they don't have sulphides, they tend to sour quicker," the sommelier explained. Wine has been made in Georgia for more than 8,000 years and the Georgians use *qvevri* or earthen pots to ferment their wine even now. Making natural wines is a gamble Georgian wine makers are increasingly willing to take because they are sought after in restaurants around the world.

Winemaking was revitalised in the

2000's. Under Soviet occupation, Rimple tells us, winemaking was industrialised and red *Saperavi* grapes monopolised the cultivation. Once local winemaking made a comeback, so did artisanal wines. Tea growing was industrialised too—mechanised harvesting in the early 1940s eased the gridlocks in the product's availability and helped gratify the appetite of Russian tea drinkers. Gradually, tea is coming back: in Tbilisi's alleyways, fashionable tea houses are cropping up, with connoisseurs harvesting wild tea groves abandoned after the Russians left the country. Even

**Soon, I could confidently order anything on the menu, but Georgian gastronomy continued to surprise me**

the *chacha*, Georgian grape brandy, is having its time under the sun.

Faces flushed from the wine, we ventured out walking past the Soviet-era buildings, which stood alongside crumbling homes with exposed brick walls and wood panelled windows. The real estate boom sweeping across Tbilisi has not reached this part of the city yet.

As the day wound down to a breezy late afternoon, we arrived at Ezo. The restaurant, hidden away behind an iron gate, has no English signage and a courtyard with an open fountain. Resident cats zipping up and down the trees around the courtyard eventually

sought our table for the soft *sulguni* cheese. Dinner began with a spread of spicy *ajika* dips—condiments made with hot red peppers, garlic, herbs, and spices such as coriander, dill, and blue fenugreek—paired with crusty *mkhadi*. This was followed by a whole bowl of *jonyoti*, pickled bladderwort flowers that taste like green peppercorns, and a cheese platter with the tangy-and-sweet wild berry chutney. Entrée was baked veal meatballs with a side of stir-fried vegetables and flaky homemade bread. The star of the show, however, was the *chakapuli*, a piquant lamb stew with tarragon and other herbs, one of Georgia's most popular dishes. The chunks of lamb melt with every bite and the meaty broth leaves dense flavours in its wake—a hint of the teeth-squeaking tartness of green plum sauce smoothed by the white wine, both a perfect foil for the gamey lamb. The Georgian feast, all washed down with delicious *Rkatsiteli* house wine, put us in a dreamy state after the meal.

In this milieu of happy meals and a food tour that left me wanting to sample more, I'd almost forgotten it was time to pack my bags. I also realised that, over the course of my trip, I had accumulated quite the collection of Georgian groceries—pickled vegetables, sour plum sauce, home brewed *Rkatsiteli* wine gifted by my driver, unrefined sunflower oil, sundried persimmons and the like.

Needless to say, my greed for Georgian groceries trumped the cost of excess baggage. But it was a small price to pay for a few reasonable Georgian meals I am able to put together back home. ★



# FEELING AT HOME WITH A LITERARY BFG

GREAT MISSENDEN, THE TINY ENGLISH VILLAGE IN CHILTERN HILLS WHERE AUTHOR ROALD DAHL LIVED, IS EVERY BIT AS WHIMSICAL AS HIS INGENUOUS CREATIONS **BY STUTI AGARWAL**



The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre (top) includes curiosities like the golden ticket (bottom) from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

**T**he London Rail is frightsome. This could well be me, but during my first week in the city, I couldn't step out of the house without detailed instructions about "what" "where" and "when" from my rather difficult aunt who had spent years tucked away in Wimbledon. You can imagine my plight then, when I realised I had to leave my cocooned world of the London Underground, a maze I had only begun to decode, to catch the Chiltern Railways out of the city and visit the village of my beloved idol, Roald Dahl. I was a nervous mess at the London Marylebone station, my anxiety heightened by the delay in assigning a platform number to my train. I scrambled from the stationmaster to the attendant at Pret a Manger with

questions every few minutes. In my final frantic run to board the train, I even knocked down an old lady's bag of house supplies. This, after I had purposefully clung to her all this while because she was to take the same train. Her pace, unfortunately, was too slow and I couldn't wait for her to catch up.

The 45-minute journey from London to Great Missenden, the quaint village tucked away in Buckinghamshire's Chiltern Hills—was just as nightmarish. As much as I wanted to pay attention to the landscape, shifting from

London's urban sprawl to bright grasslands, dotted with animals and placid lakes with waddling ducks, my eyes were fixed on the screen tracking upcoming stations.

It was only once I arrived in Great Missenden and breathed the misty early morning air, that my nerves finally calmed and I heaved a sigh of relief. Perhaps it was the BFG (Big Friendly Giant) blowing me happy dreams from behind the oak tree.

Lucy Dahl in an article for *Daily Mail* once wrote, "I am from a land of magic and witches, giants and Minpins,





woods and fields, four-leaf clovers and dandelion wishes—I am from the imagination of my father, Roald Dahl.” For admirers of the *phizz-whizzing* (brilliant) writing of one of the world’s greatest storytellers, a visit to the town he made his own for 36 years is a *gloriumptious* (glorious) step into his universe. For the uninitiated, Dahl’s Gobblefunk dictionary comprises his unique inventions, phizz-whizzing, gloriumptious, and what not.

Walking down the kilometre-long High Street, the village’s main centre, marked with buildings and landmarks that featured in Dahl’s books, I thought of the BFG. I could imagine him leave his spot from behind the tree at the station and trot silently along, blowing dreams into the ears of children sleeping in the houses with brightly painted doors.

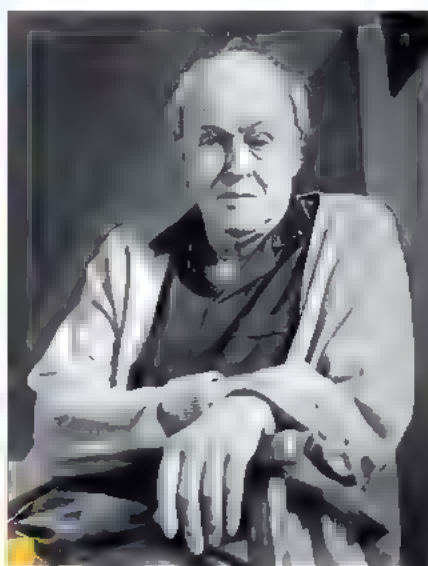
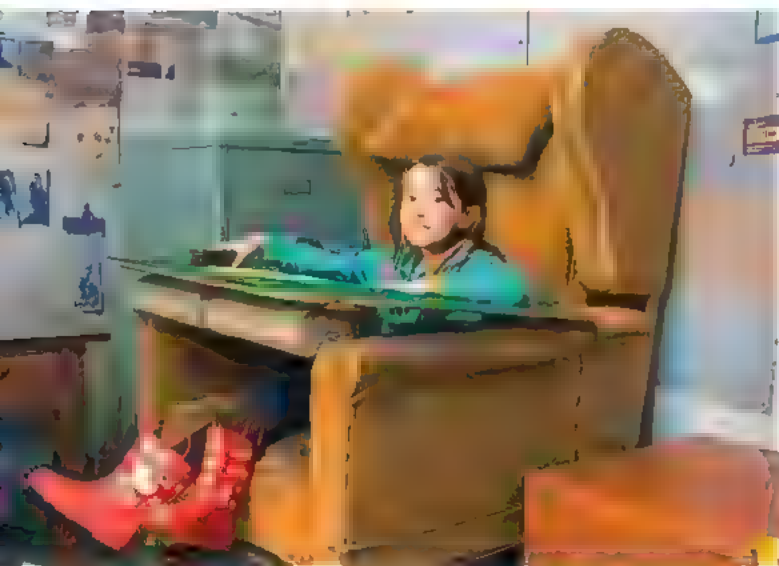
**As a children’s author who is yet to accept the challenges of my pursuit,** I walked around taking everything in

It was here, in the serene setting of Great Missenden, with its cheery mix of spotless white facades with brickwork roofs, amidst the lush embrace of forest and farmland, where Dahl found his inspiration. At one end of the street, for instance, stands the Great Missenden Library, just as it was in the 1970s when it was built, where Matilda (from the eponymous book) spent all her time. At the other end is Crown House; an austere looking home with its wood panelled exteriors, which was

the inspiration for Sophie’s unhappy orphanage in *The BFG*.

Popping out in the middle of the white canvas of High Street is the bright Red Pump Garage petrol station, which was the inspiration for the garage in *Danny, the Champion of the World*. To this date it remains its 1950s self, white Shell Oil sign and all.

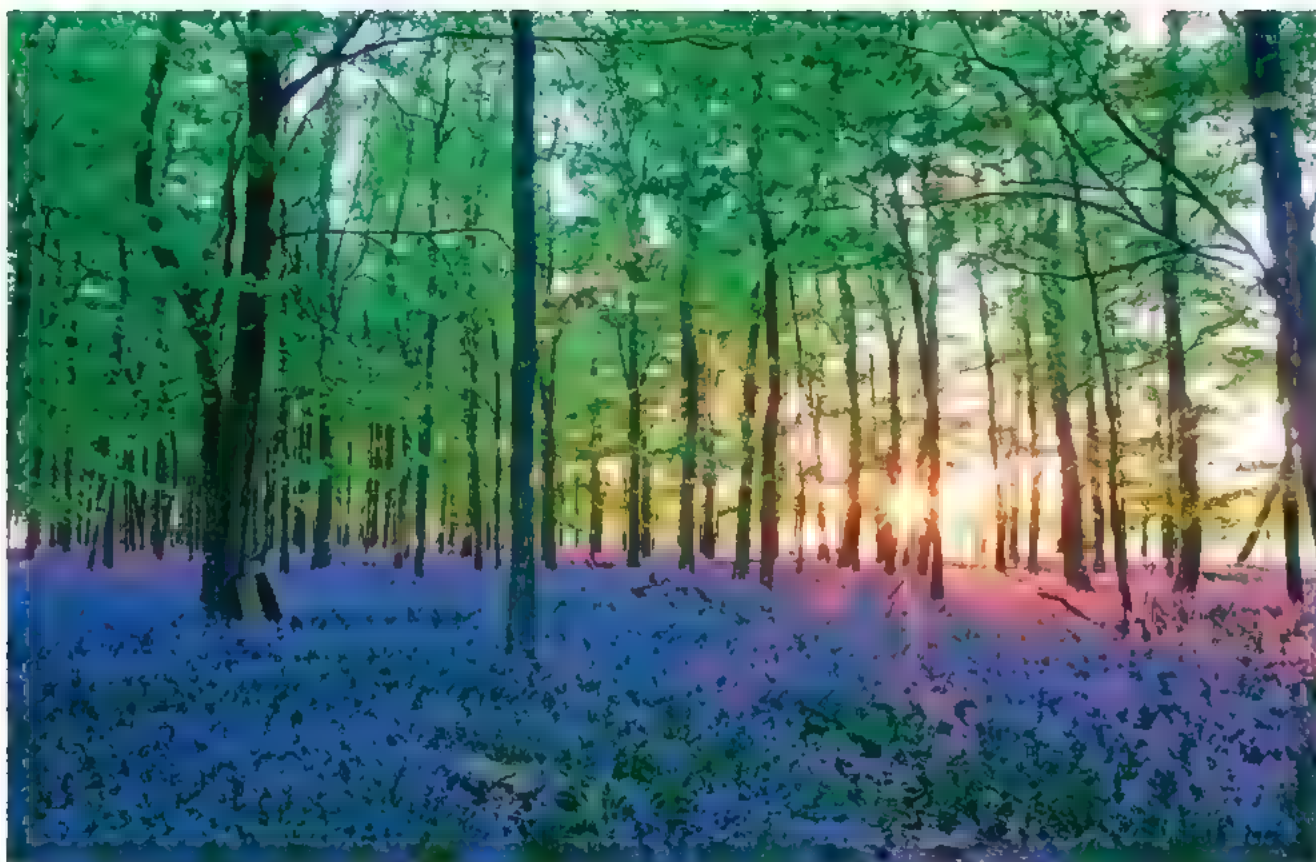
“On a hill above a valley there was a wood. In the wood there was a huge tree. Under the tree there was a hole. In the hole live Mr. Fox and Mrs. Fox and their four Small Foxes,” said Roald Dahl of one of his most popular characters, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Ophelia Dahl remembers taking many nighttime strolls with her father in these very woods; and as I trudged along the Angling Spring wood, all alone, and stood next to the fallen beech tree where he’d wait, point at a



Although Dahl’s (2) residence, Gipsy House, is not open to visitors, several of his possessions such as his writing desk (1) have been moved out to the museum. Great Missenden is steeped in Dahl lore, from the Red Pump Garage petrol station (3) on High Street to the footprints of BFG leading to Dahl’s grave (4)







Roald Dahl took many a walk in the woods (top) around Great Missenden, running after an imaginary Minpin or perhaps, seeking inspiration for the Fox family at the centre of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*; His character BFG was immortalised on a stamp (bottom) by the U.K. government.

big hole and say, "That's where Mr. and Mrs. Fox live," I could see *Fantastic Mr. Fox* sitting at the table with his family, enjoying a warm dinner.

But the Dahl experience isn't complete without visiting the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre. Bearing a bright purple facade, inscribed with *Gobblefunk* in all colours, it is fitted with the writer's creative oasis, his Writing Hut. It was moved from his home, Gipsy House, which now remains out of bounds for tourists. Luckily, all of Dahl's accessories are there. Picture his hip ball socket, which was operated out after his injury in England's Royal Air Force, eraser shavings, chocolate wrappers rolled up into a hard ball, among other peculiarities. It is here that he spent 30 years, writing only in pencil and yellow paper, adjusting the sofa and table as per his needs—he had carved out a hole in the lower end of the

cushioned sofa to help ease his back injury. As he sat for hours, he hung a tennis ball off a string on the lamp to hold its swinging neck in just the right place over his writing pad. A soft board on the back was filled with a collage of cards given to him by his children, newspaper clippings, and photographs of the family, all of which were part of his writing.

The whole town seems as if it were plucked out from a distant dream, with its higgledy-piggledy streets, pretty cottages, grazing sheep, and slow life.

As a children's author, who is yet to accept the financial challenges of my pursuit, I walked around taking everything in. I finally sat down by Dahl's grave behind the local church, talking to him endlessly about my dream of wanting to run away from the cities he so despised

and finding a home nestled in a green corner. One where Willy Wonka came to discover strange candies; Esio Trot chomped on a vegetable patch; and Minpins whistled by.

Because the chat went on for too long and I missed my lunch train back to London (darn the railways!), I waited for another one at Dahl's pub of choice—The Nag's Head—a 20-minute walk from the station, but worth its 15th-century interiors and special menu. As I sat there gobbling delicious pan-fried duck doused in jus and sipping a woody red wine, I missed two more trains. I was happy to, because I had begun penning my second children's book. It was all that Great Missenden air that had catapulted me into dreaming more vividly of the day I'd be able to live half the life my *Gobblefunk* guru once led.

(Note: *The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre* is currently shut to visitors and expected to reopen in October 2018; the author visited the museum in January 2018.) ♦



# DUTCH REVIVAL

ONCE POLLUTED, AMSTERDAM'S CANALS NOW WELCOME BACK FISH, HERONS, SWIMMERS—AND THE CURIOUS CANAL LOBSTER

**Y**ou can't really claim to know a city until you've had a discussion about its sewage with an aquatic ecologist from the local water board.

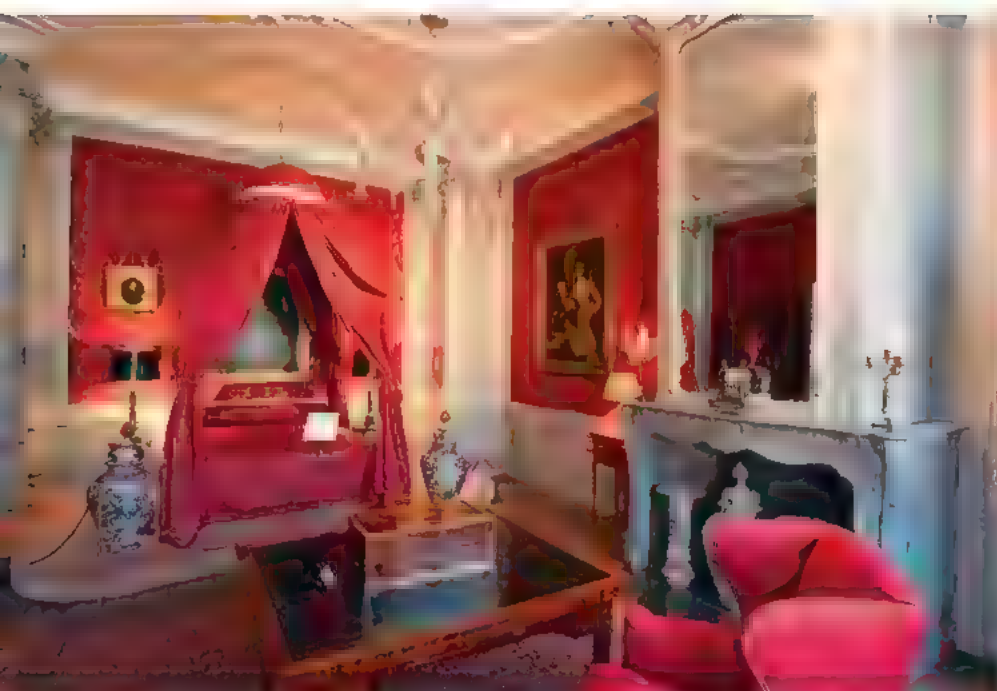
I hadn't given much thought to what goes on below Amsterdam before I met Laura Moria in a coffee shop near the Anne Frank House. Moria spends her life scrutinising the Dutch capital's canals, scooping and testing and doing whatever aquatic ecologists do to keep tabs on microscopic nasties. Until recently, it was a job that required a strong stomach. "The canals used to stink," she tells me. "They contained untreated sewage, and if you fell in you'd be rushed off to the hospital for a tetanus shot."

But the past decade has witnessed a concerted push to clean things up. Thousands of houseboats have finally been linked to the sewer system, and a special vessel patrols the channels with a net to skim off floating rubbish. There's even a boat dedicated to hauling out the 15,000-odd bikes that are chucked in the water annually.

The results have been dramatic—so dramatic, in fact, that around 3,000 people jump into the canals of their own accord during the Amsterdam City Swim each September. "Even our Queen has taken a dip," Moria says. The flora and fauna are also flourishing in the purer water. Yellow water lilies flower in summer in quieter areas, while water fleas zip about eating algae and are in turn gobbled up by fish that had previously given the







All the rooms at the Museum Van Loon had one thing in common: they all displayed large portraits of the prestigious family.

canals a wide berth. Pike, eel, and carp have all returned, along with the herons that stalk them, and coots that dabble among the reeds. There are bullhead fish, mussels, and—Moria's favourite—a snail with a head like a Smurf. It's a smorgasbord of life.

"Our tap water is filtered through the sand dunes; you must try it," she urges, as she pays for her cappuccino. "Oh, and look out for canal lobster on the menu," she adds cryptically over her shoulder before the door closes and she's gone.

Canal lobster? While there's a limit to how exciting I can find the prospect of a good glass of tap water, the mysterious canal lobster sounds like something altogether more enticing. I vow to track one down. But first: a canal boat tour.

If there are newfound riches hidden below the water's surface, those above have been plain to see for centuries. Amsterdam is a city built on water, both literally and metaphorically, the horseshoe of canals at its heart constructed during a period when the Dutch ruled the waves and this was the world's greatest port. Aboard the *Tourist*, a 41-foot salon boat with polished teak flooring, our skipper, Onno Bosselaar, noses us through a low-slung bridge separating the grandly

titled Emperor's Canal (Keizersgracht) from the more blue-collar Brewers' Canal (Brouwersgracht).

Reminders of the city's ocean-going history are everywhere. We pass the monumental sweep of Amsterdam Centraal station, a wind dial on its tower to assist sailors, and the Basilica of St. Nicholas, dedicated to the patron saint of seafarers. The waterway widens and we round the green hull of NEMO Science Museum, designed by Renzo Piano to look like the prow of a hulking ship, and then a full-size replica of the *Amsterdam*, a Dutch East India Company cargo ship—a sign we've reached the jetty of the Maritime Museum.

The Dutch East India Company is synonymous with the country's Golden Age. Founded in 1602, it was the first multinational, making gargantuan profits importing spices from the Far East. Amsterdam grew into the

**But for all the bounty earned on the high seas, Amsterdam's elite learned that water can be foe as well as friend**

"warehouse of the world," handling everything from timber and wine to porcelain.

The 17th century was a very good time to be a Dutch merchant, and their lavish mansions are strung along the most exclusive stretch of canal, Herengracht. Merchants' houses with gables like elaborate headdresses face each other across the water, as if waiting for the orchestra to kick-start a masquerade dance. And the so-called Golden Bend boasts the grandest residences of all, their double-width plots available only to those with pockets as deep as ditches.

"The fronts are nothing," Bosselaar comments as we drift past. "You should see inside!"

Museum Van Loon, at Keizersgracht 672, offers the chance to do just that. "The van Loon family made its money in herring," Tonko Grever, the museum's former director, tells me. I glance around the cavernous entrance hall with a new respect for sardines. This was a powerful dynasty: Willem van Loon became mayor of Amsterdam and his son oversaw the East India Company for 30 years.

We walk through reception room after reception room, up a sweeping staircase to bedroom after bedroom, out into gardens with manicured hedges, a golden sundial, and a brick-floored coach house flanked by classical statues. There are cherrywood chests, four-poster beds, and a stuffed peacock on a mantelpiece. And, everywhere, large portraits of van Loons in ermine or pearls, for Amsterdam's merchants loved commissioning paintings of themselves. "Rembrandt's paintings weren't for museums," Grever reminds me. "They were hung in private houses like this."

But for all the bounty earned on the high seas, Amsterdam's elite found that water can be foe as well as friend. Canal houses stand on wooden foundation piles driven deep into the mud, and when the water drops, the piles rot. This is why some houses are oddly lopsided, leaning against neighbours like walking wounded, their foundations subsiding beneath them.

I dine that night at De Silveren Spiegel (The Silver Mirror) restaurant. Though it's not on the canal, the 1614 building tilts drunkenly, with floors that sag like washing lines. I ask my waiter if the

restaurant offers canal lobster. "Erm, no," he says, carefully, as if humouring a madman. "If that's a real thing, the Kitchen of the Unwanted Animal might sell it. They'll be at Rolling Kitchens." This five-day food festival is taking place in a "culture park" northwest of the centre.

I've barely time to be heartened by the banner above the entrance, which shows a plump lobster on wheels, before I'm enveloped by noise, smell, and colour. Scores of open-sided trucks are serving food cooked at little stoves or on coal-fired grills, while musicians bang drums or strum guitars.

Every corner of the globe is covered. There's Indian cuisine at the Bollyfoods van (slogan: "Get curried away!") and Vietnamese street food at Nom Nom. Just Say Cheese ("Sweet dreams are made of cheese, who am I to diss a brie!") offers cheeseburgers, and Everything on a Stick is exactly that. Even with all the weird and wonderful foods around it, the Kitchen of the Unwanted Animal still swivels heads. Where else can you wash a My Little Pony Burger down with a glass of Japanese knotweed juice? Its origins are as unorthodox as its menu. "I'm a conceptual artist, not a cook," says founder Rob Hagenouw, handing me a goose croquette. "My kitchen was meant as a statement."

Hagenouw is pained by society's profligacy. On discovering that geese shot at Schipol airport—to cut the risk of bird strikes—were simply thrown away, he decided to highlight the waste by creating something tasty from these unwanted animals. Hence his croquette, which is creamy inside with a spicy coating.

"And canal lobster?" I ask.

"I don't have any here," says Hagenouw. "Your best bet might be Restaurant As."

Thwarted again, but undeterred, I make a dinner reservation—and that evening, there it is at last, pinky-red against the bucket, pincers raised at me with justified mistrust. This is one of several caught last night for Restaurant As by Rick Kruijswijk, who's brought it to the table for me to see before it's dispatched to the pot with the others. A canal lobster. Or, more properly, a red swamp crayfish, an invasive species originally from the U.S. that's flourishing



Restaurant As prepares canal lobster.

in the clean water of the canals.

I feel a pang of sympathy for the condemned as the crayfish eyes me from his container, but the pang quickly disappears when I reach out to pick him up and he clamps his claws onto my finger. Kruijswijk explains there's no place here for sentimentality.

"Red crayfish eat fish eggs, they kill the native European crayfish, and they dig holes in the dykes. It's our duty to eat them!" So, when Chef Luuk

Langendijk brings me a starter of crayfish tails with an herb mustard dip, I grab a fork and do my duty. Then I do it again by consuming a main course of crayfish bouillon. The meat is sweet and quite delicious.

As the plates are cleared, I ponder how many other people can claim to have been bitten by their own dinner. For all the canal lobster's allure, I decide the van Loons had it right. It's safer to stick to herring. ♦

## AMSTERDAM'S SHIPPING NEWS

Throughout Amsterdam, the once opulent symbols of the city's maritime wealth have been repurposed. The **Grand Hotel Amrâth Amsterdam**, originally built in 1912 as the headquarters for a number of the city's shipping companies, drips with symbols of the Golden Age—from the world map in its stained glass roof to the billowing sails in its mahogany panels. But the shipping companies shipped out long ago; their offices now given over to guest rooms.

**NDSM Wharf**—the city's biggest shipyard before it went bankrupt in the 1980s—is now a gritty hub of contemporary art. The industrial wasteland behind Amsterdam Centraal train station has been transformed by the space-age architecture of the **EYE Film Institute Netherlands**, while the oil refinery tower next door reopened as the **A'DAM Toren**, its focus on cutting-edge music.

Perhaps this is the new Golden Age, a waterfront renaissance driven by culture and food, an age of experiment and urban expression whose eddies and swirls will surface their very own Dutch masters.



# SOLD ON SUYA

WHEN IN LAGOS, DIG INTO NIGERIA'S KING OF KEBABS BY GEETIKA SASAN BHANDARI

**T**he minute I tasted *suya* in Lagos, I was hooked. I revelled in the juiciness of the grilled meat, which came together harmoniously with the *yaji* powder (also known as *suya* powder), in which the *suya* is marinated, while the heat caused my mouth to tingle. Served with onions, and sometimes tomatoes on the side, the spicy meat skewers also come with extra *yaji* powder, which you can dip into for enhanced flavour. It is also often eaten with rice pancakes called *masa*.

So, what is *suya*? Almost every region in the world has its own version of the kebab—*seekh kebab*, *shashlik*, *doner kebab*. In Nigeria, it is the *suya*. One of the country's most popular street foods, it has been around for so long that the history of its origin has passed on into the realm of legend. The most common meat used is beef, and it is always halal (because preparing it any other way has apparently resulted in riots), but ram, chicken, or even offal including kidney, liver, gizzards (of chicken or turkey), and tripe are also on offer. Thinly sliced, the meat is rubbed with the spice mix *yaji*, a combination of powdered peanuts, paprika, ginger powder,

garlic powder, onion powder, and Maggi seasoning. The slices are then skewered and grilled on an open charcoal flame. Some joints dip the skewers in hot peanut oil before serving, adding to the already nutty flavour of the spice. According to Babanna Muhammed, whose family runs the 35-year-old Executive *Suya* Spot, the most popular *suya* joint in Lagos, "the peanut oil

ratio for the spices.

While Nigerians like to stake their claim on *suya*, it is popular all over West Africa. Most accounts attribute it to pastoral nomads such as the Hausa tribes of northern Nigeria, Cameroon, southern Niger, Ghana and Sudan. They grilled spiced meat on bamboo skewers or their daggers over a campfire to make the first versions of *suya*. In Hausa, "*suya*" means "to fry."

Today, *suya* has made its way into fine dining as well. Pizze-Riah in Lagos's expat hub Victoria Island is a far cry from the street-side joint. The casual-chic restaurant is also the only place that serves both beef and chicken *suya*. (No. 13, Musa Yaradua Street, Victoria Island; open daily 10 a.m.-1 p.m.; NGN500/₹95 per stick.)

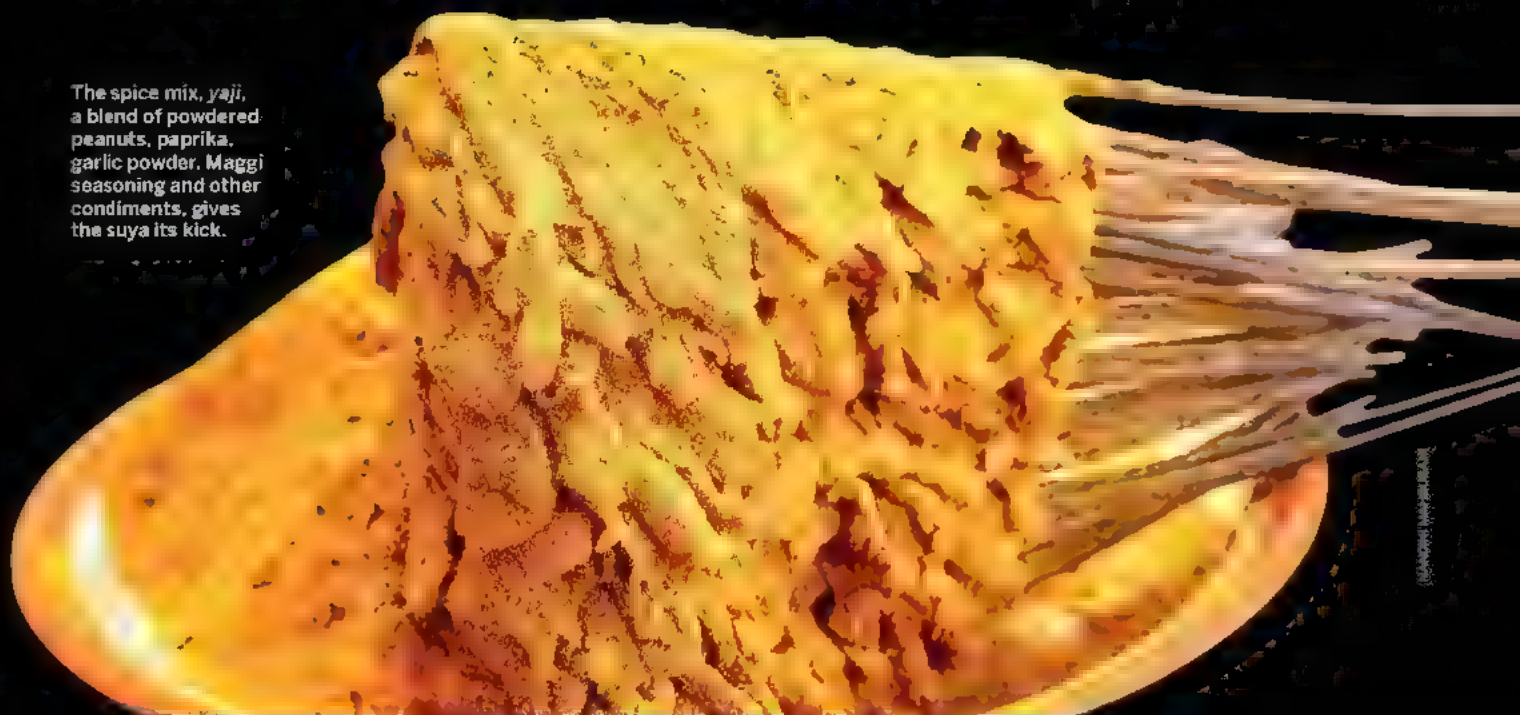
The dish is part of Nigeria's culture—outside of the food, *suya* joints are also popular spots for locals to hang out, and almost every celebration features stalls or a grill serving *suya*. As 28-year-old Oleyun, who has been selling *suya* at the Super *Suya* Spot for 15 years, says, "It is a tradition that is passed on." (Mega Plaza, 14 Idowu Martins Street, Victoria Island, open daily noon-2 a.m.; NGN500/₹95 per stick.)

**In Nigeria, *suya* has been around for so long that the history of its origin has passed on into the realm of legend.**

takes away the smokiness from the *suya* and is good for health." In other places, skewers are just taken off the flame, chopped up and served with raw onions and *yaji* powder, but a slathering of peanut oil is a must at Executive *Suya* Spot. (7 Glover Street, Ikoyi; open daily 11 a.m.-midnight; NGN500/₹95 per stick.)

There is no standard recipe, and each *suya* joint has a specific, closely guarded

The spice mix, *yaji*, a blend of powdered peanuts, paprika, garlic powder, Maggi seasoning and other condiments, gives the *suya* its kick.



# TURNING ON THE JUICE IN TURKEY

HAPPINESS CAN BE SERVED IN A GLASS; TURKEY'S STREET-FAVOURITE FRUITY CONCOCTIONS ARE PROOF



On the train back from Selçuk to Izmir we begin to debate. “I really need some,” my friend Kamini says. She brings up the map on her phone, tracing a potential route with her index finger. “Well, if we get off at the station, take this metro, and then walk till there we could get to the Kemeralti Bazaar.” I open the paper map in front of me. It looks like the route could take ages. “But it would be totally worth it,” I say. It’s almost evening and we have just spent hours on our feet perusing Roman ruins on a 37° day. Our bodies are slumped on the train seats, our esophagi dry, our minds focused on that one thing. We haven’t had our full daily fix yet.

In Turkey there is something that is cheap, easily available on the streets and provides a neural symphony of euphoria. Crack cocaine. I joke. I mean juice. Or as the Turkish seem to call it: vitamin.

You have probably heard plenty about Turkey by now, a partly-Mediterranean country of monuments, mosques, ruins and *hüzün* —that Pamukian, lingering melancholia. You may have heard of *raki*, Turkish coffee, and those wonderfully flavoursome cups of çay (chai). But you have probably not heard about the juice.

It might be odd to write Homerically of pulverised fruit served in a plastic glass with a straw through it, but hear me out. It’s multi-coloured. It’s cold. It sometimes costs just one lira. There is the ubiquitous orange, or *portakal*, a single note classic, but a giant of the juice canon. There is the *greyfurt*, the grapefruit. There is the *portakal* and *greyfurt* duet, a flavoursome punch of sweet-sour-sweet. There is the apple, the melon and the pomegranate. I could call these garden-variety options, but I wouldn’t think to

insult the gardens that produce them. Turkish fruits are obscenely flavourful. When they come together, it feels like black magic.

Before going to Selçuk and Izmir, I had my first juice in Istanbul, ambling down the pedestrian-only road that unfurls from Taksim Square to the edge of the Bosphorus Strait. There is a very real danger of being sucked into the souvenir shops where *nazar* beads, *nazar* magnets and *nazar* key rings make eyes at you. But after stopping for my first glass of juice, I have eyes only for the vitamin shops on the other side of the road. Their front ends heave under partially cut orbs of oranges and melons, intricately patterned pomegranates, and globes of watermelons containing the promise of a good time. Their ceilings are jammed with dangling pictures of fruits and prices. “2 liras! 2.5 liras! 3 liras!”

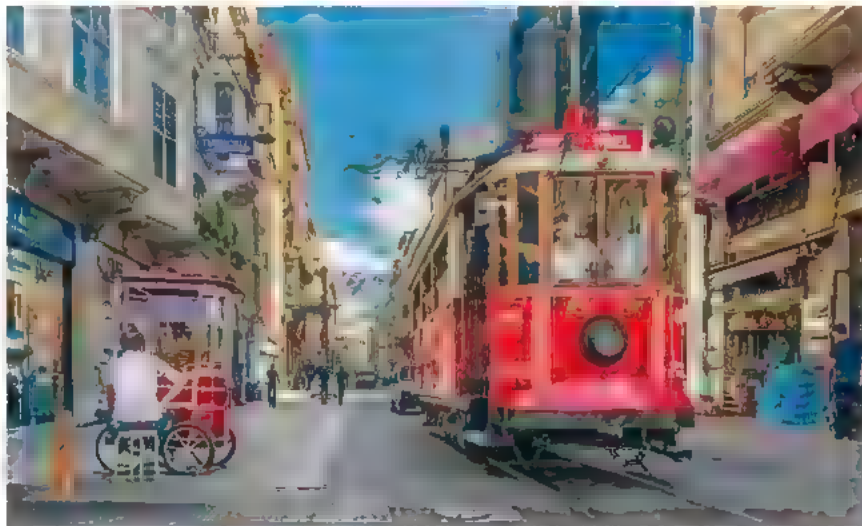




Turkey produces over 17.2 million tonnes of fresh fruit yearly, including varieties that grow in both tropical and temperate climates—the commercial juice industry went from exporting six tonnes of fruit juices and concentrates in 1970, to about 130 tonnes in 2012. It's no wonder that high-quality fresh juice is also freely available in restaurants, cafés and stand-alone stalls.

Often it's simply the greed of seeing a vitamin stall that prompts an order, or three—because juice is an aesthetic, not a digestive need. On a winding street that forms the axis through the Kemeralti Bazaar of Izmir, there is no other reason for stopping three times on the way to the ocean. At Vitaminci Hane, the lady glumly waits as we teeter between options, wanting to taste everything at once. Kamini picks Tropikal (kiwi, apple, orange, pineapple, and a kind of melon), I go with the strawberry-mulberry-pomegranate-blackberry mixture, also known as Doping. That's not the only winning name on the catalogue. There is the Tsunami (banana, milk, honey), Gökkuşagi or rainbow (blackberry, mango, banana), and the orange-melon-apple-carrot-I-lost-count combo called Atom, a bomb of a drink. By the time I return to Mumbai I would have loaded up on Vitamins A, C, K and D. I have not seen this kind of a fresh-juice culture—one that is not limited to one city—anywhere in India, or even Europe. It is, perhaps, amplified here by the needs of summer.

At a small café outside the railway station in Selçuk on a Friday evening,



Juice stalls throughout Turkey sell freshly squeezed concoctions made with a combination of local fruits (top left). Restored tram wagons run through the pedestrian-only street by Taksim Square (bottom); The Süleymaniye Mosque (top right) is an iconic symbol of Istanbul.

the square is spilling over with people. Mostly older gents nursing cigarettes, coffee and conversations, and we are perhaps among the few—if not the only two women in sight. The big screens have the Brazil-Mexico World Cup match on, and we sit down at a place that is showing us the football game but also has a juice game.

To be honest, it's only got the portakal, but this will do for now. Knives are sharpened; hemispheres are diced up and plunged face down into the metallic knob of the juicer. Kamini looks at me wistfully. "Do you think I could buy one of these to take home with me?" she asks. Together we appraise the heavy metal make a half-hearted attempt at lifting it,

and conclude that this will probably outstrip the baggage limit.

Once back in Istanbul, before heading to the airport I need to get rid of four liras. But around me is juice worth five or more. Finally I walk up to the first stall I find near the Nuruosmaniye Mosque and hesitantly point to the portakal sign with five on it. "But I have four," I say, in a combination of English and baleful self-pity. The man in charge sighs and directs me to the counter anyway. "It's okay," he says. A few minutes later he hands me something tall, cold and orange.

Reader, hüzn is a scam. If it is possible to buy joy in a plastic cup at any street corner how can this be a city of cultivated gloom? ♦

# THE CAIRO CHALLENGE

CHURCHES, TOWERS, AND HISTORICAL RUINS JOSTLE WITH URBAN-CHIC CAFÉS IN THE DESERT CITY. CAN YOU CRUISE IT ALL IN 72 HOURS? BY SARVESH TALREJA

**T**hink Cairo, and the image conjured is that of the grand Giza Pyramids, with their imposing presence just outside the city. The city's other sights are almost accidentally divided into distinct zones, some rich with tradition, others whispering of more modern, global influences. Coptic Cairo is the city's medieval quarter, with mosques, and ruins dating back to the third century A.D. Brace yourself for experiences steeped in Cairene cultures past and present, whether it is a visit to the Mosque-Madrassa of Sultan Hassan—the city's most majestic structure—to Cairo's vibrant local market, to the bustling Muizz Street or the Egyptian Museum.

DAY 1

## 9.30 A.M. EGGS BY THE NILE

My first day in the city sees me seize the many offerings of Zamalek, the glamorous northern part of the Gezira island on the Nile. Dotted with elegant townhouses, Zamalek houses embassies from all over the world. Away from the chaos, its tree-lined streets march to the beats of a gentler drum, with trendy cafés and restaurants, and well-behaved traffic usually whizzing towards the majestic Cairo Opera House.

Begin your day at Left Bank, a river-

side café that offers a smattering of buttery breakfast options, from Western offerings like muffins and croissants, to the traditional, heartily indulgent Cairene breakfast. The generous spread consists of slabs of feta cheese, sprinkled with tomatoes, accompanied by local staples like falafel and a flavourful fava bean dish called *ful medames*. Two eggs cooked in a style you like round up this morning meal, eaten in Cairo's chic setting, against the backdrop of the Nile. A meal for two here costs EGP350/₹1,370.

## 3 P.M. CAIRO FROM UP TOP

Calling the Cairo Tower a tourist trap would be harsh but accurate. Go anyway, for the only other way to get a bird's-eye view of the city is a helicopter ride, or a visit to the higher floors of a five-star hotel in the neighbourhood. The immediate landscape of the island is a geometric splatter of pools and grassy grounds, belonging to neighbouring Al Ahly and Gezira sporting clubs, membership to which is often limited to Cairo's elite and athletic. The bursts of breeze on its towering terrace are refreshing, as you see bridges stretch out toward the city from the island, and cars speeding along by the banks of the Nile. The

quiet at this hour is a relief from the flow of tourists, which usually begins toward the evening, when Cairo Tower is bejewelled with colourful lights. The café located just under the terrace is a promising spot for a light meal, coffee, and a changing panorama of Cairo, as the sun descends. It is open between 9 a.m. to 1 a.m., and tickets are priced at EGP180/₹705.

## 7 P.M. THE SOUND OF (OPERA) MUSIC

The most prominent structure in the National Culture Centre, Cairo Opera House is a well-appointed performance venue. With a main auditorium that seats 1,200, one can go here in formal finery for a performance by Cairo's finest music groups. The elegant room is split across four levels, tailor-made for opera and ballet performances by the touring global groups it frequently hosts when the theatre is not staging its own repertoire. Also worth a visit on the campus is an open-air theatre with

A part of the historic old quarter, Coptic Cairo houses churches, mosques and ruins dating back to the third century.







The Mosque-Madrassa of Sultan Hassan (left) is a 14th-century architectural wonder. The Hanging Church treasures some gorgeous art and mosaic (top right); A typical Cairene breakfast (bottom) delights with falafel, feta cheese, and a fava bean dish called *ful medame*.

delightful acoustics, and a thoughtfully curated Museum of Modern Egyptian Art which displays the works of local artists across mediums—painting, sculpture, and other mixed media. The museum, which I visited for free, remains closed on Mondays and Fridays and is open from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. and 5-8 p.m. on all other days ([www.cairoopera.org](http://www.cairoopera.org)).

### 8.30 A.M. FINDING JESUS

Visiting the architectural stronghold of Christianity in Egypt without a quality guide is unwise. Outfits such as Walk like an Egyptian, among others, provide well-informed, English-speaking guides for the purpose, and for other places of historical interest across Cairo.

Start by gazing at the Roman ruins, as your guide walks you through the empire's time in the city. Proceed to The Hanging Church, named for its vivid location above a gate leading into the Roman Empire's Babylon Fortress. After climbing 29 steps, one enters a

grand room to marvel at ornate walls, carved pillars, and benches featuring woodwork under a high-vaulted roof. Proceed to Saint Serguis and Bacchus Church, which sports a brick-exposed interior, believed to be built at the spot where the holy family rested after their Egyptian excursion. Its most curious feature is a 10-foot-deep crypt, revered for its reputation as a resting spot for Mary, and Joseph and infant Jesus.

While the main attractions of Coptic Cairo are its churches, there is also a small, sepia-toned market underneath the main street, featuring a jewellery shop and well-priced books about Egyptian architecture and history.

### 3 P.M. MOSQUE MOST MAGNIFICENT

Built during the Mamluk period, the massive Mosque-Madrassa of Sultan Hassan is an ambitious attempt for the 14th century. The mosque has been thoughtfully designed to include the four schools of Sunni thought: Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanafi and Hanbali in enclaves inside its 118-foot-high walls. Commissioned under the patronage of Sultan an-Nasir Hasan despite a steep daily cost of 30,000 dirham, this structure remains incomplete. It never fulfilled its eventual purpose of holding his body, which was not found after his assassination. The Sultan gave Egypt one of its grandest mosques, still among the largest in the world. Its architecture features the decorative chinoiserie style, right next to an ornate entrance indicating Egypt's trade ties

with China over 600 years ago. The curious egg-shaped dome is made of wood. Past the entrance, lamps hang from the mammoth ceiling, with the mosque's tallest point being a 223-foot-tall minaret.

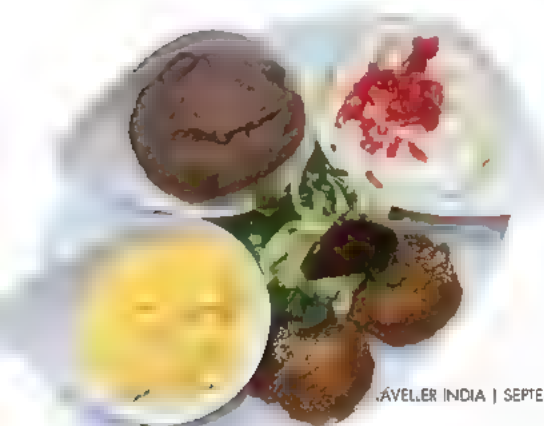
### 5 P.M. GATED GREENS

Wind down with a stop at Al-Azhar Park, Cairo's greenest urban attraction. The gated park, opened in 2005, was originally a landfill, transformed at the initiative of Agha Khan IV, 49th and current Imam of Nizari Ismailism. Sprawling over 30 hectares of central city land, it is a veritable oasis in the urban hustle of Cairo.

Bordered by a 12th century Ayyubid dynasty wall, the gardens in the park follow traditional Islamic architecture, with prominent waterways and walkways gently dividing the green space into cosier enclaves. A variety of food courts and restaurants overlook wide views of the city, including the historic Mosque of Muhammad Ali on the western horizon. You'll find the park filled with yoga classes, couples by fish ponds, and children playing by the fountains with families watching from nearby benches. Visit an hour before sunset to bask in the golden light, and watch the light change across the park and the city. Entry is EGP20/₹78.

### 11 A.M. TUTANKHAMUN'S GOLD

One of the largest museums in the region, the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, commonly known as the



## THE ITINERARY EGYPT

Egyptian Museum or Museum of Cairo, is a must visit—with an Egyptologist in tow. Guides are usually found by the ticket counter, and can be hired on an hourly basis. Inside, the grand ground floor features a collection of New Kingdom (1550–1069 B.C.) objects, including a variety of traditional coffins arranged by style, withering scrolls of papyrus, and coins from across kingdoms and cultures, largely Islamic, Greek, and Roman. The first floor houses two rooms of mummies, arranged with notes on ingredients used in the processing of each body, often with obvious and visible effects.

The most-viewed attraction at the museum is Tutankhamun's tomb, displayed in its entirety on the first floor, alongside his bust, a series of complex gold coffins, and more gold trinkets, objects and jewellery than one would expect to see in a lifetime. The museum is open from 9 a.m.–5 p.m., and tickets to the museum cost EGP120/₹470, with an additional EGP150/₹587 for entering The Royal Mummies Hall.

**2 P.M. SHOP LIKE AN EGYPTIAN**  
Cairo's largest and most vibrant tourist souk, Khan El-Khalili, offers a promising collection of shops. Known

for its semi-precious and precious jewellery, the marketplace has trinkets of every colour and price, and is a good spot for souvenir shopping. Originally built as a mausoleum for the Fatimid caliphs, the structure underwent sea changes since, eventually re-modeled in the 16th century by Sultan al-Ghuri. Inspired by the Ottoman style, it closely resembles a Turkish bazaar.

Drop by the 100-year-old café Fishawi for its sepia-steeped ambience known for having hosted local and international celebrities. Egyptian Nobel Laureate author Naguib Mahfouz and more recently, Will Smith—over the years. An ideal order would include mint tea or the hibiscus-based *kurkade*, considered Egypt's national drink, with a shisha on the side. You will probably need the shisha after all the bargaining at the souk. Fun fact: Most of the shops decide their own timing. An Egyptian-style coffee at Fishawi, which is open 24x7, costs EGP20/₹78.

### 6 P.M. MAPPING HISTORY

Dubbed the 'world's largest open air museum of Islamic monuments,' Muizz Street comes into its own after sunset. Located a short walk north of Khan El-Khalili, this bustling walk is



flanked by some of Egypt's oldest and grandest structures. A stroll can unveil architecture from dynasties that have ruled the city in different eras—from the Fatimid dynasty in 970 A.D. to the more recent Pasha rule, of which famed emperor Muhammad Ali was the most prominent. Home to the Qalawun Complex, it also houses a spectacular masoulem, and prominent Mamluk architecture, including the precious sight of a minaret within a dome.

At night, the entire street lights up. Enjoy traditional Egyptian street food like *shish taouk*, *hamam mahshi* (Egyptian braised pigeon), and *mahshi* (stuffed grape leaves), against the rich backdrop. Remember to go with a history book or a guide. ★



JOSÉ LUCAS/AGE FOTOSTOCK/ONORA PHOTO LIBRARY (A.C.C.) ERIK VALENNE GEDSTORY/SHUTTERSTOCK (A.B.E.)

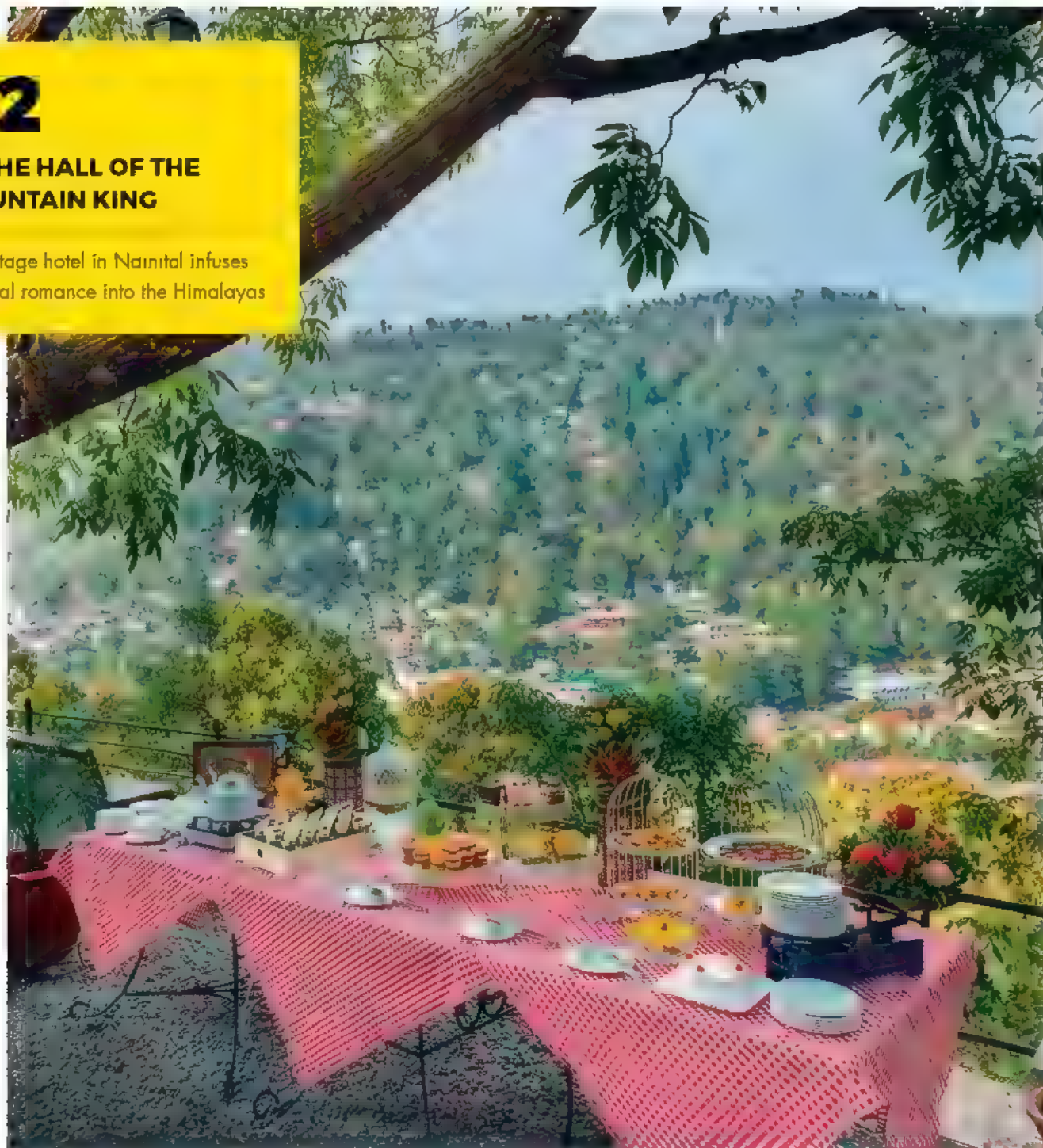


# THE ADDRESS

72

## IN THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING

A heritage hotel in Nainital infuses colonial romance into the Himalayas



21 LAKE RETREATS AROUND THE WORLD

MAIN RETREAT



## *In The Hall of the* **MOUNTAIN KING**

What do you get when you add the Himalayas to colonial romance, and curios to Kumaoni cuisine? A heritage hotel in Nainital

BY SOHINI DAS GUPTA



To my left, Nainital Lake coils with the stillness of a crouching tiger, moonlight staining the dark shores that our car shins up. I have eyes only for the road, but can't see much. Tailed by a midnight mist and a turning stomach on the hour-long drive from Kathgodam railway station, now would be a good time for the hairpin bends to end. Was I thinking out loud? For Rafique, who seems to have driven the trail a hundred times, turns to me and says, "Ten more minutes, madam, and we reach." Indeed we do. Naini Retreat—formerly the residence of the erstwhile Maharaja of Pilibhit, and my haunt for

the next couple of days—is carved into the slopes of Ayarpatta like a neatly-tucked cravat. But it is 12.30 a.m., which means no amount of squinting would unveil what I imagine to be the steep, stony frame of the hotel. So I hobble to my room in the Maharaja Wing, shovel in some mutton curry and rice, and call it a night.

### **AZALEAS AND ARTEFACTS**

I wake up to a cream ceiling, patterned and pale against the woody browns of the doors, window frames and a pull-out chest in the room. If I find myself fixated on the play of colours, it is because the





At Naini Retreat, rooms (top) are awash in muted tones of the earth and forest; Vintage artefacts (bottom) ring the corridors of the heritage hotel. Facing Page Built in 1927, the royal residence (top) was refashioned in 1989; Hydrangeas blush in the hotel's fountained garden (bottom).



sun has been doodling on the ivory and cream walls decked with watercolours of forest scenes, gambolling off chintz armchairs. Outside the window, the Kumaon Himalayas, pencilled into the sky, are hemmed by walnut trees and a lilac burst of hydrangeas. I make a mental note: Idle along the way. On my way to Gurney House, the resort's multi-cuisine restaurant, I cross twin staircases, mirrors, painted porcelain plates, nooks fringed with vintage artefacts (the brass hookah and chipped wood-chest slow me down), and pencil sketches reiterating the Raj-era theme. Outside, the hydrangeas I'd spied out of my window grin brighter in the company of azaleas, daisies, fuchsias, and button dahlias. The English orderliness of the garden, centred around a two-tiered stone fountain, is diffused by an outgrowth of large trees beyond the perimeters. Here, lanky pines jostle with chinars, oaks and deodars in their empire of wilderness. I'd linger some more, but that would mean six acres of walking,

and a drizzle, quick as a giant tracing paper flung over the town, is starting to fog up the scenery.

At the buffet, I meet other travellers over mouthfuls of sausages, grilled tomatoes and hash browns. We've been diagnosed with a case of magical-mountain-appetite, which, Head Chef Puran Suyal assures, is easily cured by his Kumaoni recipes. While only walnut and rosemary grow in the garden, he works with locally sourced fresh produce, explains Suyal, rattling off names like *gahath/kulath* (horse gram), *jakhriya* (Asian spider flower), *galgal* (hill lemon), *arbi* (colocasia), and *bhatt* (black soybean).

Suyal's specialities will have to wait till the night because lunch will be served at the neighbouring property of Himalayan View Retreat in Ramgarh, about an hour's drive



away. Before that, we have time to walk the cobbled trails that cleave and meet around the retreat. Turns out, this summer palace, built in 1927 under the patronage of Maharaja Sahu Har Prasad, was reimagined as a heritage hotel in 1989, when the 'new wing' was added to the original Tudor-inspired architecture. "That garden you walked through?" Vibhas Prasad, Sahu's descendant and director of parent group Leisure Hotels offers, "It used to be a tennis court where tennis-and-tea parties were hosted." With 52 rooms, many of which pack in sweeping views of mist-caked mountains or Naini Lake below, the atmosphere can catch you off-guard. Between the old-world interiors and the hills, the place can conjure a sense of nostalgia you may not recognise as your own. Windows here will serve daydreamers rather well. There's also a spa, a bar, and a theatre room—for old-style movie nights played out on projector—a dramatic reveal

here, a collective gasp there, I imagine. Readers, pack a couple of atmospheric books, perhaps your old copy of *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*? (The resort is an hour-and-a-half away from Jim Corbett National Park). The extra luggage might unlock a different side of your stay.

The trip to Ramgarh is filled with swigs of tongue-scalding tomato *shorba*, a whimsical pine cone heist, and a chatty meal that I'll remember for the mutton *shukar* and *atte ka halwa* that kept finding their way back to my plate. Relatively small, the Himalayan View Retreat looks like a hunting lodge designed by a man of decadent tastes, with Persian rugs, lush couches, and wooden windows as big as doors. The scene is set for a siesta after lunch, but an adventurous fellow traveller rallies a small group for a short trek to the nearby apple orchard. I'm glad I come along, for we are tailed through the slippery slope by a black dog whose cocky strut rubs off on our yawning selves.

By the time we reach Naukuchiatal or the 'lake of nine corners' 20 minutes later, we've worked up an appetite for cha-pakora with a side of mountain lore. The name Nainital, we learn, is derived from the eye-shaped lake (*naini*, eye; *tal*, lake), which, according to Hindu mythology, is a manifestation of Sati's eye falling on the spot during Shiva's grieving tandava. Also significant is the presence of the Naina Devi temple, whose bells often join the ones at the Methodist Church, said to be India's first, in sweetening the valley air. On our way back, a desolate trail coaxes someone to turn to the driver for assurance. "There are no monkeys here,



The main dining hall (top) is called Gurney House; Between the mist and the mountains (bottom), Nainital brews a strange nostalgia.

right?" "No, no *bandar*," the good man smiles. "Only tigers sometimes".

At the resort, dinner—including a succulent *kathal* (jackfruit) *biryani* and *pahadi mustard raita*—reflects Suyal's affection for local recipes.

The next morning, my last in Nainital, is reserved for a trip to the Mall Road, which runs alongside the lake. Blue-green ripples across the water and candy-coloured boats tethered to the bank dissolves its nocturnal mystery, not beauty. Dotting the road are shop windows with cheerful woollens and wooden souvenirs. I eyeball a miniature rickshaw, but settle for the more practical dark chocolates instead and different versions of the Uttarakhandi sweet *bal mithai*.

Noontime, and the skies clean up after themselves. My heart is drowsy with a happiness that can only be found at the core of a good walnut tart, or those sun-coloured lemon cream rolls I wolfed down on the side. If I squint hard enough, I can see brown trails ribboning through the opposite slope—the clearest the view has been since I arrived. I leave in a few hours, but I think I'll be back.

Perhaps when I'm looking for time portals, fern shadows and far-away cocoons to hide out in. Or when I am ready to take the roads not taken. ✱

## Essentials

The 52-room, Tudor-style Naini Retreat is a 10-min drive from the town centre ([www.leisurehotels.co.in](http://www.leisurehotels.co.in), doubles from ₹8 500)





# A CABIN BY THE LAKE

Soak up these 21 water-lapped retreats for birders, anglers, and absinthe-sippers



Ring a special bell in the island church near Slovenia's Vrnjci, and you're said to have the best of both worlds.

Oceans crash and rivers run wild, but lakes somehow, even when they bluster, evoke a sense of serenity. They combine wonder (cold or warm? deep or shallow?) with the certainty that those shores make a full circle.

Lake resorts let us drift away—both literally on a boat and figuratively from life's everyday stressors and demands. These top 21 combine lodging and lakes in a dialectic of indoor and out that betters them both.

—*Elaine Glusac*



An 18th-century marble palace, the Taj Lake Palace in Udaipur reflects the country's storied past. Facing page The outdoors seem to forever beckon and are never too far at Wyoming's Brooks Lake Lodge & Spa, set deep in the Shoshone National Forest.

## ARGENTINA

### WILD STYLE

Located between two lakes, the **Llao Llao Hotel & Resort** in Patagonia dates back to the 1930s, when the surrounding national park was first protected. After a day of windsurfing, indulge at one of six dining options or the serious spa. [llaollao.com](http://llaollao.com)

## CANADA

### VIEW FROM A CANOE

Fronting glacier-blue water so stunning it once starred on the Canadian \$20 bill, **Moraine Lake Lodge** guarantees a paddler's Rocky Mountain high. The log-and-stone decor echoes the Banff National Park locale. [morainelake.com](http://morainelake.com)

## CHILE

### GLACIER GAZING

Blending in with the Patagonian Pampas on the shore of Sarmiento Lake, at the edge of Torres del Paine National Park, **Tierra Patagonia Hotel & Spa** operates like a push base camp for wilderness explorers. At this National Geographic Unique Lodge of the World, daily excursions such as trekking in the mountains or riding with *baqueanos* (local cowboys) are followed by sumptuous meals paired with Chilean wines. All 40 rooms, the indoor pool and the telescope-outfitted lounge frame views of the lake and the glaciers beyond. [tierrahotels.com](http://tierrahotels.com)

## ENGLAND

### CHANNELLING BEATRIX

The gracious 36-room **Linthwaite House**, on 14 acres of woods and Peter Rabbit-esque gardens, overlooks Windermere, England's largest lake. A recent renovation installed a conservatory for tea sipping with water views. [linthwaitehouse.com](http://linthwaitehouse.com)

## INDIA

### A LITTLE ROMANCE

Built in 1746 for royal trysting, **Taj Lake Palace** is its own island of columned courtyards and arched walkways in Udaipur's Lake Pichola. Arrive to a shower of rose petals, then enjoy a massage on the spa boat. [tajhotels.com](http://tajhotels.com)

## ITALY

### CAMPARI & CLOONEY

Just a stone's skip from the A-listers' estate on Lake Como, the former home of 19th-century opera star Giuditta Pasta now hosts **Castadiva Resort & Spa** with a dramatic bar and a heated swimming pool built into the lake. [www.castadivaresort.com](http://www.castadivaresort.com)

## MALAWI

### THE LIFE AQUATIC

In Lake Malawi National Park, Robin Pope Safaris' **Pumulani Lodge** offers wildlife tours of the lake, where guests snorkel with schools of colourful fish. Cap the day with a sunset sail on a traditional dhow. [www.robinpopesafaris.net](http://www.robinpopesafaris.net)

## U.S.A.

### TIME TRAVELLING

Life moving too fast? Claim a rocker on the world's longest porch, at the seasonal **Grand Hotel** on Mackinac Island, and survey the strait between Lakes Huron and Michigan. It's eternally 1887 here, with dress-code dinners and carriage tours. [www.grandhotel.com](http://www.grandhotel.com)

## U.S.A.

### LAKE LESSONS

Cast a line for bass, then learn to cook your catch at **Big Cedar Lodge**, from the owner of Bass Pro Shops in the Ozarks. To see more of the 43,000-acre Table Rock Lake, go to ski school or rent a pontoon boat. [www.bigcedar.com](http://www.bigcedar.com)



## MYANMAR

### KEEPING IT LOCAL

Guests of the **Inle Princess** set out by traditional skiff to visit stilt villages built over Inle Lake and the ingenious fishermen who row with their legs. In the resort's teak frame "houses," find Inthar weavings and Shan paper lanterns. [inle-princess.com](http://inle-princess.com)

## U.S.A.

### LISTENING TO LOONS

Set amid 12,000 acres on Elk Lake in the Adirondacks, rustic 1904-vintage **Elk Lake Lodge** is a nature immersion. Connect the dots of 28 islands via kayak or canoe while spotting moose, bears, and loons. [www.elk-lake-lodge.com](http://elk-lake-lodge.com)

## NEW ZEALAND

### INSTAGRAM READY

No matter where you are at **Matakauri Lodge**—in the glass-walled restaurant or suites with window-side day beds—Lake Wakatipu and the Remarkables mountains are on view. [www.robertsonlodges.com](http://www.robertsonlodges.com)

## U.S.A.

### FRESH AIR FARE

In the Deschutes National Forest, **Suttle Lodge & Boathouse** keeps the vibe rustic-chic with log-beamed cabins and plowby chairs around the lodge's stone fireplace. Top guest chefs whip up wine-paired dinners on the dock. [www.thesuttlelodge.com](http://www.thesuttlelodge.com)

## PERU

### CATCH YOUR BREATH

At 12,500 feet, **Titilaka lodge** has stunning views of Lake Titicaca from most of its 18 rooms. Boat to the islands of the world's highest navigable

body of water, raft through its reeds, or visit local village markets. [titilakape.com](http://titilakape.com)

## PHILIPPINES

### LOVE ACTUALLY

There's a reason why so many weddings take place at the island of Luzon's **Lake Hotel Tagaytay**: Taal Lake makes a magnificent backdrop, with Taal Volcano Island at its centre. Come for the view, stay for the adobo. [www.lakehoteltagaytay.com](http://www.lakehoteltagaytay.com)

## PORTUGAL

### COLOUR THERAPY

On the Azores' São Miguel Is., and, **7 Cidades Lake Lodge** sits alongside the blue half of dual-lake Lagoa das Sete Cidades (its neighbour is green). Stay

in a modernist bungalow to birdwatch or soak in nearby hot springs. [7cidadeslakelodge.com](http://7cidadeslakelodge.com)

## SCOTLAND

### NESSIE WATCHING

From **Loch Ness Lodge**, you can spend hours scanning the mesmerising lake for the namesake monster. The Hilton Highlands escape also offers lake cruises through its larger sibling hotel; next door, the Loch Ness Clansman. [www.loch-ness-lodge.com](http://www.loch-ness-lodge.com)

## SLOVENIA

### POLITICAL ASYLUM

The former summer home of Yugoslav president Tito, **Vila Bled** overlooks a 17th-century island church in Lake Bled. Reach it via traditional pletna boats from the resort pier or

rent your own rowboat via [bled.si](http://bled.si)

## SWITZERLAND

### WALKING ON WATER

Pleanty of tropical resorts offer overwater bungalows, but rarely do lakes, which makes **Hôtel Palafitte** on Lake Neuchâtel categorically exotic. Built for the Swiss National Expo in 2002 on the theme of surprise, the hotel comprises 24 wood-clad bungalows above the lake and 14 more on land. Guests can paddleboard directly from porches equipped with swimming ladders. At sunset, search for the green flash with help from the "green fairy," or absinthe created in the canton of Neuchâtel. [www.palafitte.ch](http://www.palafitte.ch)

## TANZANIA

### SAFARIS & SUNDOWNERS

A National Geographic Unique Lodge of the World, **Rubondo Island Camp** is the only accommodation in the namesake national park. Join boat safaris on Lake Victoria and toast sunset from the water. [www.nationalgeographiclodges.com](http://www.nationalgeographiclodges.com)

## U.S.A.

### GOING OFF-GRID

Forget cell service at **Brooks Lake Lodge & Spa**, deep in the Shoshone National Forest. Instead opt for riding, canoeing, or hiking at the retreat built in 1922 as a stopover on the way to Yellowstone. [www.brookslake.com](http://www.brookslake.com)



PHOTO COURTESY OF BROOKS LAKE LODGE

# THE DESTINATION

## 80

### ON THE ROAD TO BIG SUR

French illustrator Jean-Julien finds inspiration on a road trip along California's central coast



GARY YEOVE/PHOTOLIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES

UNMOORED IN MONGOLIA • TO GREECE OF YORE • QUEENSLAND: THE COAST IS CLEAR  
OF HANDLEBARS AND HILLS IN SPAIN • RIDING ON THE LUCK OF THE IRISH



THE DESTINATION

# ON THE ROAD *to* BIG SUR





French illustrator *Jean Tullien*  
finds inspiration on a road trip along  
California's central coast

ARTISTS ON EXPEDITION

Bixby Creek Bridge  
stands as the gateway  
to Big Sur, along  
California's Highway 1.





## THE ROUTE

Over five days I drove 550 kilometres north from Los Angeles in a rental car, stopping in Paso Robles, Big Sur and Monterey and ending in Santa Cruz. I stayed in a yurt, soaked in moonlit hot springs, dined in romantic vineyards, marvelled at the rhythmic beauty of jellyfish at the Monterey Bay Aquarium and wiggled my toes in the purple sand of Pfeiffer Beach while recording my adventures in a sketchbook.





Basking in Pacific Ocean views from the deck of my yurt at Treebones Resort

## WHEN YOU TRAVEL, EVERY LANDSCAPE IS A NEW PLAYGROUND

Working in a studio, I find it's easy to get into a rut. That's why last year I packed up my life in London and headed to Los Angeles, where I lived and worked for six months. Having grown up in Brittany, France, I've always found the seaside to be inspirational. So in November I set out on a classic American road trip along California's central coast. I documented my journey by placing paper cut-outs on location and shooting vignettes with my iPhone. Here are the lessons I learned. ➔





## EMBRACE NATURE

Walking in the wilderness sparks creativity—and there's a lot of wild in Big Sur, from secluded, rocky beaches to misty forests. I spent a night at **Ripplewood Resort**, in a tiny but perfect cabin that was near the road and yet felt like it was deep in the woods. On another night at **Treebones Resort**, I slept in a yurt near the edge of a cliff with an ocean view that occasionally vanished in the fog.



## PRESS YOUR NOSE TO THE GLASS

Finding new perspectives leads to worlds of wonder. At the **Monterey Bay Aquarium**, often the only source of light comes from tanks where the sea creatures live. You can forget you're human and think you're a fish. The aquarium is home to more than 35,000 animals and plants representing more than 550 species, including hypnotic jellyfish. I'm obsessed with drawing fish, so it was ideal for me.



# YOU ALWAYS NEED FUN! AND THE CENTRAL COAST HAS LOTS OF ROOM TO ROMP



## DRINK IT IN

Tasting a place can be just as important as seeing it. Paso Robles, a wine region between L.A. and Big Sur, surprised me—and surprise is the point of a road trip, right? At **Justin Vineyards & Winery (2)**, the landscape was richly drenched in sunset light and reminded me of France. The wine was oaky yet bright, and seemed to reflect the spirit of the landscape. After my American wine epiphany I drove north where I savoured American foods, such as **burgers (1)**, while devouring grand views of Big Sur.





## GOOF OFF AND GO LOCAL

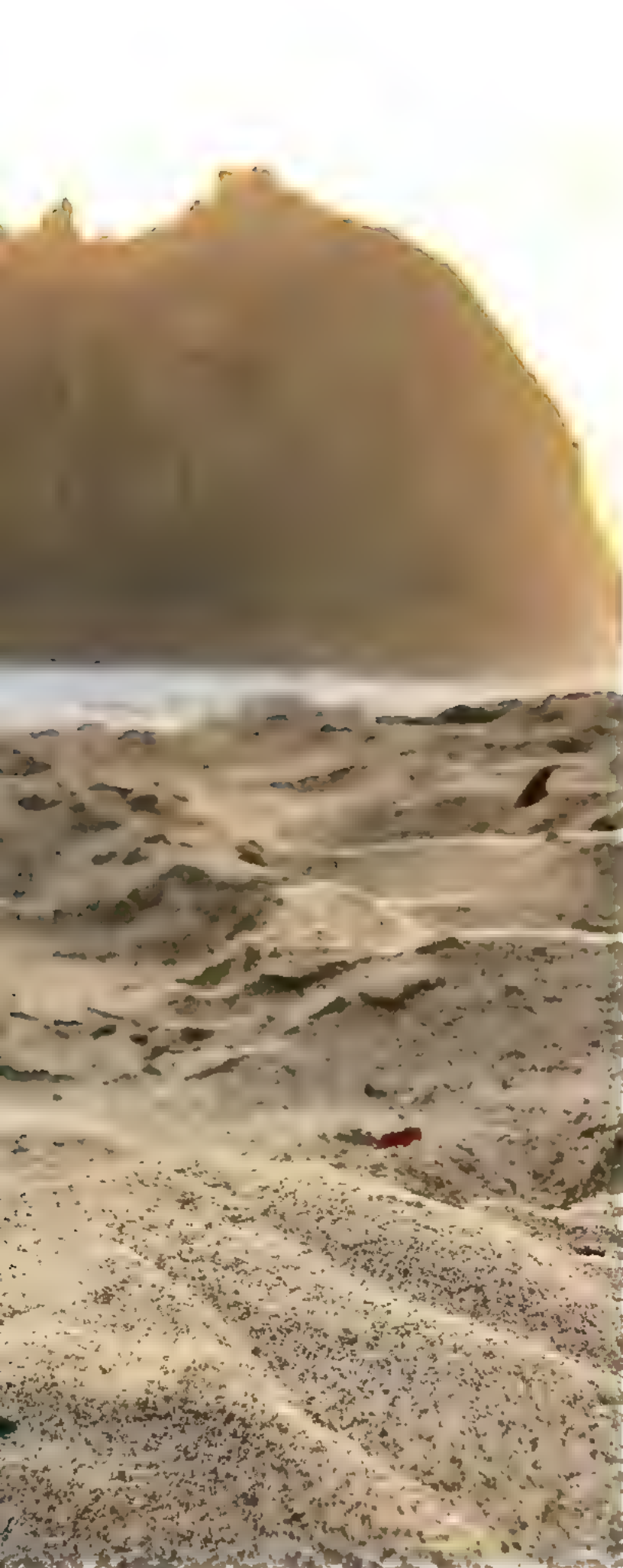
Getting out of your comfort zone is difficult but rewarding. One of my favourite experiences of the entire journey was at the Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, where late-night soaking in cliff-side hot springs is a thing. Native Americans have come to these baths for healing rituals for 6,000 years. It's still a popular pastime, so I had to book right when online reservations opened at 9 a.m. I headed to the springs at 1 a.m. that night. It was ethereal. You're in a moonlit hot bath, and all you hear is the sound of waves breaking. The springs are clothing optional, but I'm a French prude, so I kept my bathing suit on. As I said, getting out of your comfort zone is difficult.

Speaking of swimsuits, I looked pretty good in a bikini on the historic **Santa Cruz boardwalk (3)**. The boardwalk stretches a kilometre and a half along the beach and is a wonderland of fried Oreos and amusement rides. I managed to resist the temptation of the cookies and was still feeling pretty good from my workout **(4)** back in Monterey. But you can't be a bona fide beach bum in Santa Cruz until you ride the **Giant Dipper (5)** roller coaster. It was wild, rickety, and thrilling. I rode it four times.









## LOOK FOR THE AHA! MOMENT

Slowing down is the secret to recharging your creativity. I come from a small fishing village in Brittany, so I'm drawn to intimate, more remote beaches where I can find a bit of quiet and steal some time for reflection. I normally avoid super-touristy spots, and Big Sur was ideal for these types of discoveries. My favourite was a little beach blanketed with driftwood that I found after a 20-minute walk from the road. There were surfers but nobody sunbathing or swimming, so it felt secluded and secret.

Which is not what **Pfeiffer Beach** feels like. Pfeiffer is famous for its spectacular Keyhole Arch rock formation (left), its patches of purple sand, and its epic sunsets. The beach can become very busy. At one point, dozens of people with phones and cameras gathered at the same spot to capture the sun setting through the keyhole, focused on getting my paper cut-out positioned perfectly in the sand so I could create my own scene.





## GET DIRTY, RETURN FRESH

Drawing in the field gets pretty messy sometimes, but that's also the fun of it. I love nothing more than to create when I'm on the move—it feels unfiltered and genuine. But you have to stick to the basics and try not to think about whether you're making something good or not. Travel is important to my practice because my creations are often inspired and influenced by novelty. I arrived back in L.A. with an empty tank and a sketchbook full of purple sands, foamy waves, seabirds, surfers, and towering trees, energized by this strange and cool pilgrimage.

**Jean Jullien** (@jean\_jullien) has returned to London, where he makes illustrations, posters, books, videos, costumes, installations, and clothing. He has shown work at the Tate Museum and the National Museum of Singapore. He has illustrated for the *New Yorker*, the *Wall Street Journal*, Phaidon Press, and other publications. To see more of his Big Sur adventure, visit [natgeotravel.com](http://natgeotravel.com).

## Travel Wise

## BIG SUR

Chiselled into towering cliffs and dense redwood forests, Big Sur has long drawn hippies, writers, yogis, and artists seeking solitude and inspiration along California's Highway 1, a twisting, rugged ribbon connecting Los Angeles and San Francisco. Despite recent natural disasters that have challenged locals and travellers, Big Sur still boasts some of the most stunning scenery in the entire country. —Kimberley Lovato

## SEE

Both cultural centre and bookstore, the **Henry Miller Memorial Library** pays homage to the author and long-time Big Sur resident. Pick up one of his novels, and listen to local musicians who often perform in the redwood grove. Turn of the century **Point Sur Lighthouse** sits atop a volcanic rock and is now fully automated. Visit with a guide by day, or take a summer moonlight tour and find out if the rumours of hauntings are true. The locally made jewellery, art, note cards, and other one-of-a-kind gifts at the **Phoenix Shop at Nepenthe** make excellent souvenirs.

## STAY

## FOR COUPLES

**Glen Oaks Big Sur**  
The retro-styled cottages, rooms, and cabins here breathe romance, but for a real splurge opt for the Big Sur Cabin, where a private patio hides two claw-foot tubs beneath redwood trees. (Rooms starting at \$300/£20,845 a night; [glenoaksbigsur.com](http://glenoaksbigsur.com))

## FOR FAMILIES

**Big Sur River Inn**  
This riverside lodge is ideal for families thanks to a fenced-in pool and a choice of 22 rooms and suites (starting at \$150/£10,250 a night). Stock up on burritos at the general store, then indulge in local ice cream from a shop inside a retrofitted blue and yellow bus. [bigsurriverinn.com](http://bigsurriverinn.com)

## TAKE ME WITH YOU

Cut out #flatjean, snap his pic on your travels, and post it to Instagram with the hashtag.



## DINE

## FOR COMFORT FOOD

## Deetjen's Big Sur Inn

This cosy restaurant/inn serves breakfast and dinner and is filled with photos and other treasures that look plucked from a favourite aunt's attic. Sunday brunch is popular, and choosing between eggs Benedict (\$14/£9.50) and blueberry pancakes (\$11/£7.50 for three) will be the toughest part of your day. [deetjens.com](http://deetjens.com)

## FOR LOCAL BREWS

## Big Sur Taphouse

The closest thing to a neighbourhood pub, with 10 mostly local beers on draft, the Taphouse has an added bonus: fantastic food. Share the charcuterie platter (\$15/£10.25), or go all out with the three huge tacos served with your choice of fillings (\$10/£6.85). [bigsurtaphouse.com](http://bigsurtaphouse.com)

## FOR THE VIEW

## The Sur House

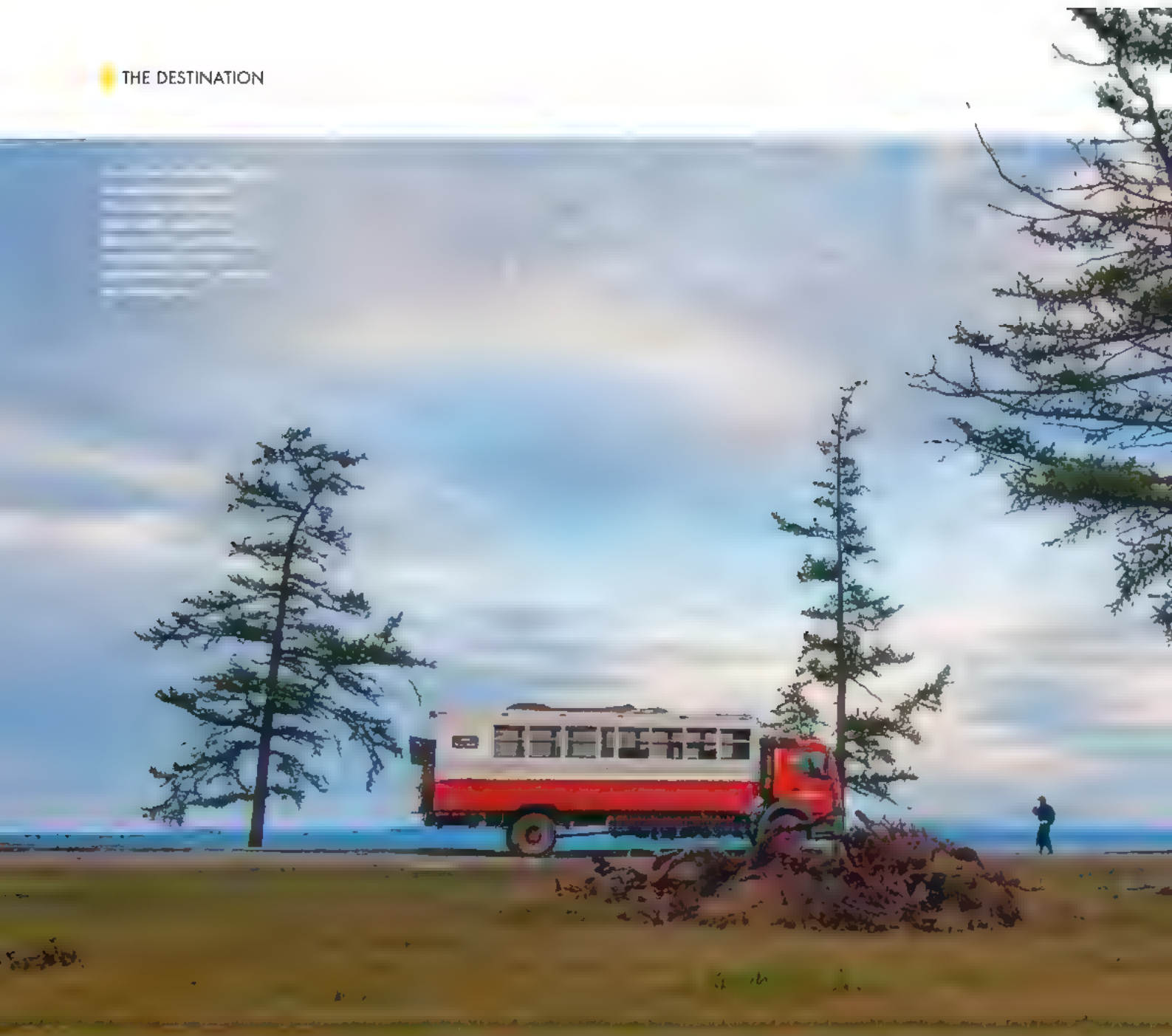
The signature restaurant at Ventana Big Sur resort doubles as a sunset-watching perch, especially at the outside bar, where a scaled-back menu served from 6 to 9 p.m. offers a double patty burger for \$16/£11.00 and crispy oyster lettuce wraps for \$12/£8.20. [ventanabigsur.com](http://ventanabigsur.com)

## PLAY

An easy 10-minute walk to the fringe of Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park reveals gorgeous coastal scenery, including the 80-foot-high **McWay Waterfall**. (Park in the lot, but head away from the park entrance.) For a highlight reel of spectacular forest and beach vistas, a hike along 14-kilometre **Andrew Molera State Park Loop Trail** is tough to beat. And spring brings a colourful bloom of wildflowers. Dog-friendly **Sand Dollar Beach** is the largest curve of sand on Big Sur's coast and is a well-known surf spot, if you can handle the frigid water. Keep a lookout for dark green Big Sur jade, found here and almost a kilometre away at appropriately named Jade Cove. Both are close to Paskett Creek Campground. ♦

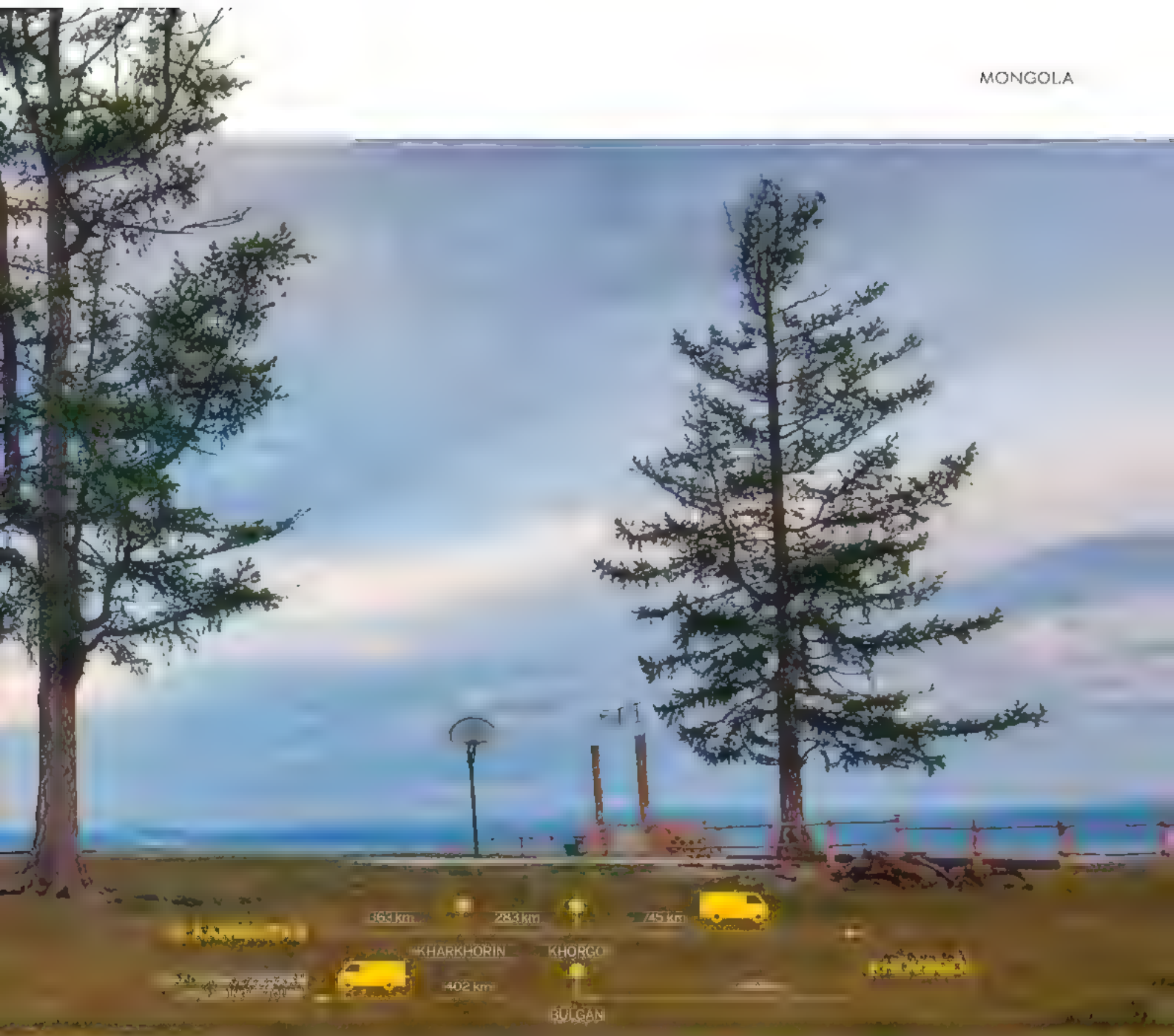


THE DESTINATION



# UNMOORED IN Mong

MONGOLA



# olia

ON A 21-DAY ROAD TRIP  
ACROSS THE COUNTRY,  
A WRITER SHEDS  
PRECONCEIVED IMAGES  
OF ITS LANDSCAPE AND  
EMBRACES SURPRISE

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
**NEELIMA VALLANGI**

OLEGROV/SHUTTERSTOCK



# An endless

expanse of azure blue stretched in front of me as our boat cut across the waters of Khövsgöl Nuur (nuur means 'lake' in Mongolian), the Blue Pearl of Mongolia. Arctic herring gulls furiously flew overhead, disturbed by our intrusion into their territory, a rocky island full of cormorants, gulls and other water birds. There was alpine greenery all around. My mind struggled to recalibrate the preconceived picture of Mongolia I held. Where were the green steppes and barren slopes? Where were the wild horses? And the gentle rolling hills?

Spread over 2,760 square kilometres, Mongolia's second largest freshwater lake looks less like a lake and more like the sea, ringed by mountains sporting either denuded slopes or lush Siberian larch. Meandering through the glorious steppes of eastern and central Mongolia over two weeks and 2,000 kilometres, I had arrived as far as the Siberian taiga on the northern edge of the country, near the Russian border. It was the farthest point on the journey before I circled back to the capital, Ulaanbaatar, over another week. This was turning out to be the ultimate road trip— isn't it one of the greatest

joys of travelling long distances by road, I wondered, to see the landscape change and feel a visceral change within?

**F**our years ago, I spent nearly a month in Mongolia traversing its desolate hinterlands, occasionally on tarmac but mostly on far more exciting dirt tracks.

Travelling in a huge overlanding truck—it could seat over 25 people and was kitted with large glass windows and two sunroofs—our motley bunch of about 20 travellers from around the world was shepherded around by two expert skippers and two Mongolian guides. Starting from the dreary Ulaanbaatar, we were on a circular route through the central and northern parts of Mongolia that included stops at the town of Kharkhorin, the erstwhile capital of the Mongol empire; the diverse and stunning Orkhon Valley, the dormant Khorgo volcano, ancient monasteries of Erdene Zuu and Amarbayasgalant, and lake Khövsgöl among others.

Carrying food, water, kitchen and camping equipment, and personal belongings, we were on the road for three days before we pitched our first camp at the Orkhon Valley. Low-lying pine-covered hills and endless pastures surrounded our campsite beside the Orkhon River. It felt incredible to spend a few days on the road without being bothered by the availability of boarding and lodging. We zipped by gorgeous, secluded locales by day and spent nights in *ger* camps pitched in unbelievably scenic locations, like beside the Zuun Nuur, a remote saltwater lake surrounded by rolling hills, or by the banks of the Delger Morön river at the outskirts of an otherwise dull town. It was one of the first things that struck me about Mongolia: eye-popping beauty was as pervasive as the air we breathed. That kind of access to pristine nature was astonishing, a novelty to me, being only used to the long chases and hardships warranted by any pursuit of wilderness in India.

Companions make or break a road trip, and by joining a group tour, I'd signed off the luxury of choosing my fellow travellers. Thankfully, my group was a lively, well-travelled bunch from Europe and Australia. On the long road, several days were spent playing an addictive dice game called Yahtzee that a British traveller had brought along; nights spent around bonfires under starry skies brought us closer.

Being in a tight group of foreigners meant local interaction was hard to come by. Here, I found that identifying as an Indian in Mongolia brought me a bit of that serendipitous exchange I was craving. At Kharkhorin—the Mongol empire between the 13th and 14th centuries now reduced to a smattering of few blockhouses with colourful roofs—a young girl was thrilled to meet me atop a hillock. I was waiting to watch a mesmerising sunset over the Orkhon River, Mongolia's longest, meandering through fertile pastures. She recounted her fond experience of learning from volunteering Indian teachers. Later, an older man fishing on the riverbanks below



A boat ride on lake Khövsgöl, Mongolia's second largest, involves spotting hundreds of waterbirds perched on surrounding cliffs.



A montage of  
 colourful sights  
 at the Amarbayasgalan  
 Monastery  
 on holiday with  
 looking to escape  
 air's pollution  
 the 108 stupas along  
 Monastery's gate  
 khurin (





When I was in Mongolia, I was staying in a tent in a camp that I had set up for the purpose of observing the local flora and fauna. I was a biologist and I was interested in the local flora and fauna. I was a biologist and I was interested in the local flora and fauna. I was a biologist and I was interested in the local flora and fauna.

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**T**he first time I saw the Mongolian landscape was in the middle of a road. I was driving from Ulaanbaatar to the south. The road was a dirt road and it was very dusty. I was driving from Ulaanbaatar to the south. The road was a dirt road and it was very dusty. I was driving from Ulaanbaatar to the south. The road was a dirt road and it was very dusty.

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Tourist camps of gers, similar to the shelters of nomads in the Mongolian countryside, are common stay options for travellers. This camp by the shores of Ogii Lake looks particularly lovely on a moonlit night.

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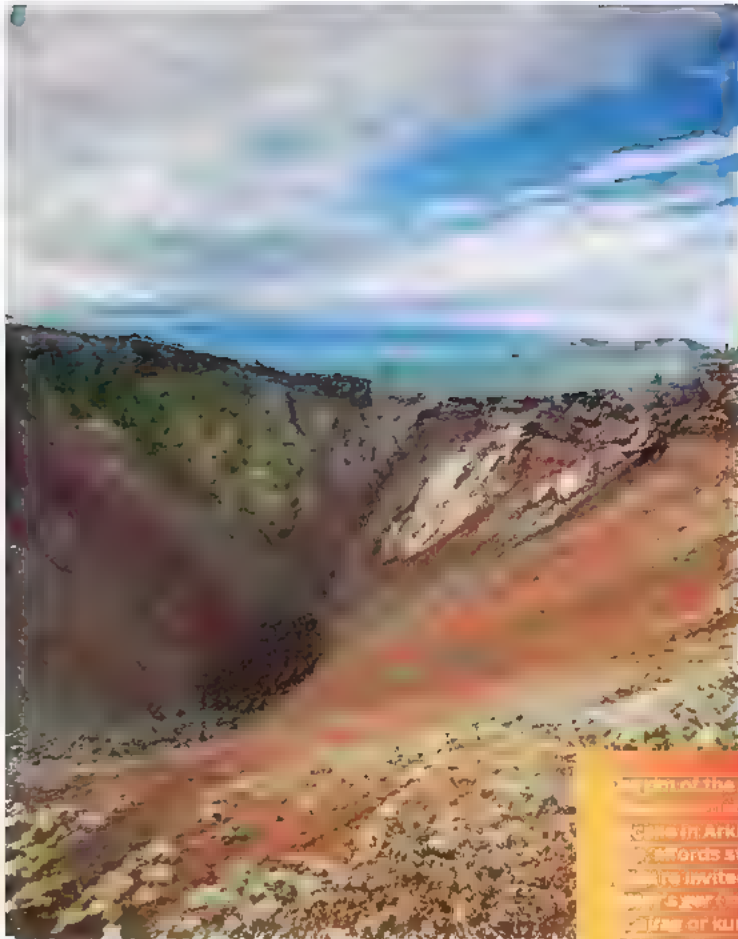
The truck rattled along on the dusty road and I was surprised. I was surprised. I was surprised. I was surprised. I was surprised. I was surprised. I was surprised. I was surprised. I was surprised. I was surprised.

There are no direct flights between India and Ulaanbaatar. You can fly from Delhi to Hong Kong, Seoul, Beijing, or Peking, and then from there to Ulaanbaatar.

The visa can be downloaded at [consul.mn](http://consul.mn) and submitted along with relevant documents at the Embassy of Mongolia in Delhi. The visa is free and takes 3-4 working days to be processed.

The writer undertook the 21-day overlanding trip with Dragoman Travel ([www.dragoman.com](http://www.dragoman.com); from Ulaanbaatar to Delhi and back). Food and detour expenses from Ulaanbaatar and back.





The rim of the crater at  
 ... an extinct  
 ... in Arkhangai prov.  
 ... offers stunning views.  
 ... are invited to a nomadic  
 ... (sagor), request  
 ... or kumis: fermented  
 ... milk and a beloved  
 ... liquor. Long summer  
 ... the road prove ideal  
 ... of UNO  
 ... Isutgaian, or  
 ... waterfall  
 ... a popular picnic spot  
 ... in July and August







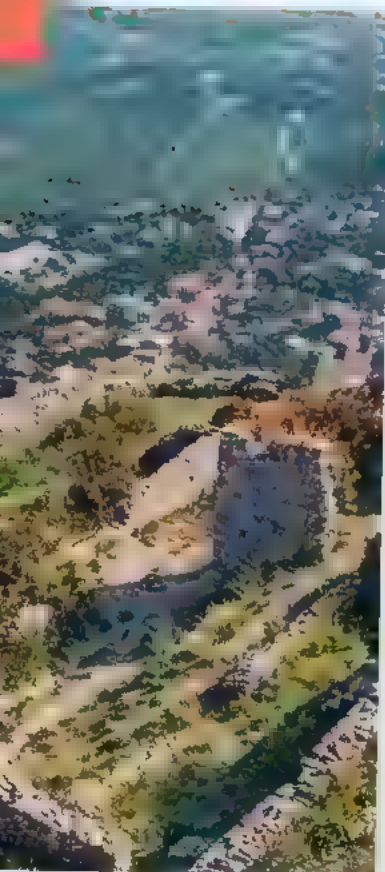
For the writer and her friends, the Piraeus port's large parking lot doubled as an ad-hoc photo session zone.



Amid the medieval ruins of Mystras lie remains of homes inhabited through centuries and across empires.

# TO GREECE OF YORE

BY TEJAL PANDEY



Mystras is exemplary for its Byzantine church architecture and is also speckled with Romanesque and Gothic art

Driving around Greece's Peloponnese region, one learns to distinguish its ruin-rich history from the popular imagery of white seaside houses

ATHENS



120 km

MYCENAE

99 km

KARYES

34 km

▶ SPARTI

TOTAL DISTANCE 253 KM



IT HAD BEEN A LITTLE OVER A MONTH FOR ME ON PAROS, A CYCLADIC ISLAND IN GREECE, IN THE NOVEMBER OF 2011.

By then, I had become quite accustomed to the rhythms of island life. Or so I thought. I realised the extent of my affinity for this new environment only after spending a week away. It was mid-term break at The Aegean Center for the Fine Arts, where I was pursuing a course in art and photography, and four of us students were invited to spend the holiday at a friend's ancestral home in Karyes. Greece so far for me meant the islands around Paros, Athens and the Aegean Sea. So the mention of her village conjured up an image of yet another sleepy little seaside hamlet.



Catching the evening ferry back to Paros from Piraeus affords views of an Aegean sunset and dusk settling upon lit-up islands.

After a four-hour ferry ride to Piraeus in Athens, we were greeted by my friend's uncle who was kind enough to lend us his car for our road adventures. We set out a little after noon, on what I was told would be a three-hour road trip up to Karyes, a picturesque village located at the foothills of the Parnon mountain range in the Laconia prefecture. The ferries that ply between the Cycladic islands and Athens are usually well-rigged with a full pantry service, so the only pit-stop we really made was for fuel and a certain Bailey's milkshake that my friend had been eagerly looking forward to. As we pulled away from Athens into mainland Greece, the landscape transformed. I sensed the sea recede into the distance as we headed south towards the Peloponnese—a region I had never heard of, until then. More a peninsula, the area is significant for being home to the ancient towns of Sparta and Mycenae birthplace of the Mycenaean civilisation which lasted from 1600-1100 B.C., and was Europe's first major civilisation. Karyes itself is located just an hour's drive away from Sparta, the town where Sparta once stood, and another major



The cemetery in Karyes offers a spectacular view of the village located at the foothills of the Parnon mountains

town, Tripoli.

We had no smart phones and GPS and worked our way out old-style, with a real paper map and my friend's memory. By the time we entered Karyes, it was too dark to tell land from sea. Chips, fruits and other edibles depleted, we gorged on all the available Greek fare at Ardamis, a diner outside the village. The saganaki, a fried cheese appetizer with a squeeze of lemon, and the meaty gyros, I recall in fond memory. By the time we turned in for the night, Karyes had turned eerily quiet. I remember feeling the fatigue of travel and yet being unable to sleep. The stillness and the silence, accentuated by the biting cold, took some getting used to. A deceptive sun gave temporary respite the next morning, taking away the gloom of a wintry night. Looking out at the village from the wooden verandah of my friend's house, I felt like I could very well have been in an Alpine village somewhere in Switzerland.

Karyes looked postcard-perfect with its winding roads and red-roofed homes. It was different from Paros in every way. The mountains here felt intimidating as opposed to the island's



The writer climbed ancient plane trees, believed to have been planted by the Mycenaean king Menelaus in 1100 B.C.

hills that looked accessible enough to traverse on foot. Unlike the salty island breeze, the air here carried the heady, sweet scent of walnut and chestnut trees. They also gave Karyes its other name—*Arachova* or *Megali Arachova*, meaning place or grand place of walnuts, as it was referred to in Byzantine times. We spent all of one morning climbing these massive plane trees, many of which have trunks hollow enough for you to hide inside of them.

Walking around the village, one understands the peculiar calm of Karyes. There is no denying its pristine aura, a world untouched by modernity. Not surprisingly, it was also said to be home to the Hellenic goddess Artemis, protector of young girls, in whose honour the Caryatids—mythical maidens from *Caryae* or *Karyai*, an ancient Greek name for present day Karyes—performed chorus dances. But today, the village is populated largely by the elderly as the younger lot has migrated to either other cities in Greece or to other states across Europe and America. A lot of homes lie abandoned, languishing away. Summer though is a livelier time to visit





Mystras's stone walls hold multiple portals for natural light to pour in from all directions, highlighting its architectural nuances



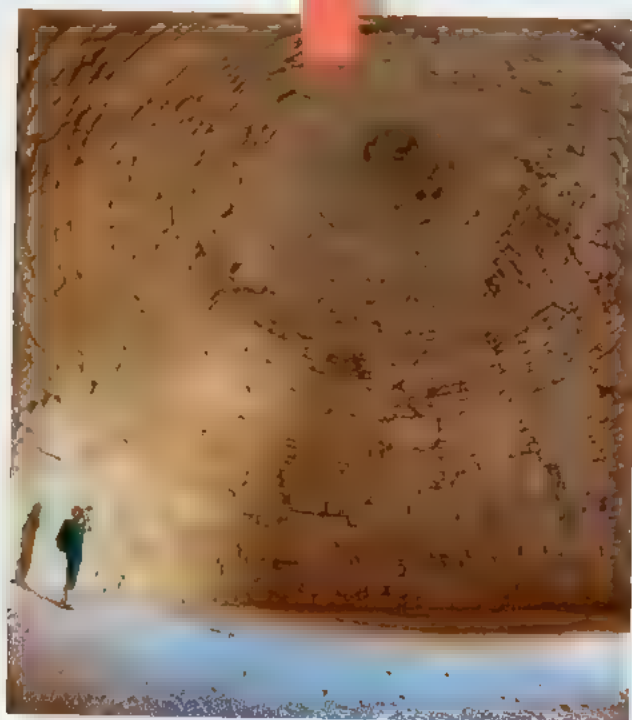
Karyes is known for its cheese, olives, and olive oil—but the writer's favourite was the fresh blueberry jam, gifted by a local friend

the village as cafés and squares buzz with people late into the evenings. But if one is looking for the quintessential lonesome, silent mountain town experience, Karyes in the winters it must be. Even layers of woollens might fall short if you plan to step out after sunset during the season. An evening walk, however short, up the steep slopes in the punishing cold seemed like a Herculean task. We would often find ourselves running to our destination to keep warm. Some evenings when we felt less brave, we simply stayed in, snacking on fresh chestnuts that we roasted ourselves in the fireside.

Thankful to have a car to drive around in, we tried our best to make the most of our short daylight hours. One cannot, if on this side of the Peloponnese, miss visiting the ruins at Mystras. Barely a 10-minute ride by road from Sparta lies what was once the fortified capital town of the Byzantine Despotate of the Morea (Morea being what the Peloponnese was called in the Middle Ages). Home to the Palaiologos family—the last of Byzantine Greek royalty, the town became an important center for culture as well as politics. It remained inhabited

right up to 1832, through the Ottoman reign and was deserted only when the new town of Sparta sprang up around 1834. Even today, walking through the ruins that offer breathtaking views of the sprawling civilisation below, one can feel the narrow lanes echo with its rich history. Mystras, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was the “lost treasure” that our friend's granddad would take her to visit as a child. We could see why.

Driving back to Athens, we spent a while at the town square in Sparta, eating spanakopitas (traditional Greek spinach pies) by our car and recreating in our minds the ancient town of Sparta that once stood in the very spot. Be it Mycenae to the north of the peninsula, or Sparta and Mystras to the south, one cannot separate the overwhelming sense of history that washes over you while you travel through the Peloponnese. Our minds full of all that we had seen and felt in the past six days, we returned to the warmth and open seas of Paros. This time around, it was the Peloponnese that was receding into the distance, as was our trip, like a fantastical voyage into a great big book of history, legends and mythology. ♦



Mycenae, a Bronze Age city holds archaeological treasure troves, such as The Tomb of Agamemnon, who led the siege of Helen.



The Peloponnese region is significant in Greek history for being home to the ancient towns of Sparta and Mycenae

## ESSENTIALS

**GETTING THERE** There are no direct flights between India and Greece. Flights to Athens from major Indian metro cities usually include one or more layovers at a Middle Eastern or European gateway such as Dubai, Doha, Frankfurt and Rome.

The best time to visit Greece is in spring (Apr-mid Jun) and autumn (Sep-Oct), when the weather is mild, and the crowd less.

**VISA** Indian travellers to Greece need a Schengen Visa. Applications can be made to the Embassy of Greece in New Delhi or one of the VFS Application centres around the country ([www.vfsglobal.com](http://www.vfsglobal.com); single entry visa ₹4,860 free for children under 12).

**GETTING AROUND** Karyes is about 220 km/3 hr from Athens airport by road. Take a bus, train or taxi to Piraeus, which is Athens's main port (50 km/1 hr) or to Karaiskaki Square (40 km/45 min). Intercity public transport or KTEL of Laconia, have regular buses plying from Piraeus port and Karaiskaki Square to Karyes. These journey also include the Tripoli-Sparta and Sparta-Korinth routes.

Should you too choose to use Karyes as your travel base, Sparta is about an hour away by road. Karyes to Mystras is 40 min and Karyes to Mycenae is about an hour-and-a-half.

**EAT** Do not forget to sample sumptuous staples like saganaki, a fried cheese appetizer, the meaty gyros and spanakopita, the traditional spinach pie.



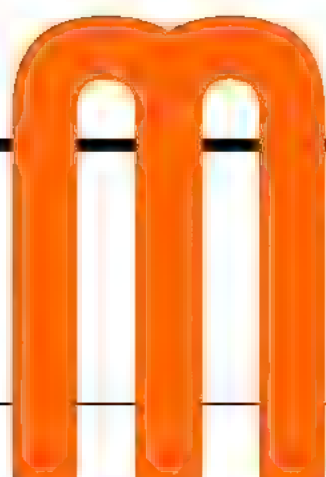


AN EXHILARATING AND EXHAUSTING  
JOURNEY ALONG PICTURESQUE SEASIDE  
TOWNS IN AUSTRALIA DEEPENS A  
FAMILY'S INTERGENERATIONAL BOND

# queensland: the coast is clear

BY CHAMON DOULTRAMAN

Byron Bay is a popular day trip destination. (Facing page: TONGUE BAY) At Muddy's in Townsville, the avocado eggs Benedict is a highlight. The writer's family followed a one-night-only itinerary. Magnetic Islands' beach lover's prayer come alive.



CAIRNS

735 km

MACKAY

840 km



NOOSA

225 km

➤ GOLD COAST  
TOTAL DISTANCE 1,800 KM

My father called me early this year when I was in Banaras with a suggestion: A family road trip to Australia. I was caught off guard. Less than three years ago, my family, friends and I had driven across New Zealand for two weeks. Now here he was again, at 73, expectantly asking me, "No cities, just the countryside, like last time?" It sounded tempting and I said yes.

In the last week of May, at the onset of winter in the southern hemisphere, I was off to Australia with my parents and younger sister for two weeks. Our itinerary mostly included a long and winding discovery of the Queensland coast by road. We were heading to Australia to attend the housewarming party of my father's best friend Ajit, who had purchased a new home in Townsville.

All my father's friends decided to make a merry holiday out of it. Seven of us travelled (not together) from India, three including Uncle Ajit, his wife Auntie Helen, and their friend Anthony from Hong Kong. Uncle Michael, who also lives in Townsville, travelled to Cairns to meet us. The eleven of us, of which my sister Chahna and I were youngest, travelled in two cars: a white Ford Ranger driven by Uncle Michael and the other a grey Toyota Kluger. We started north in Cairns and travelled down south, hugging our woolies a little tighter as it got colder.

## THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

Cairns was among the more urban destinations along our route. The weather was still summery when we checked into our motel. Winter was supposed to be a few weeks away. Later that evening, we gathered at Cock & Bull, a spacious pub with high wooden ceilings, yellow lights, and large fish sculptures hanging from the ceiling. Between loud rock music and speedily downed beer pitchers, I felt emboldened to pick something adventurous from the menu and settled for the Roo & Croc Combo. The dish comprised a portion each of kangaroo and crocodile meat along with some fries and tartar dip. Kangaroo meat, tougher than chicken, was a smidge chewy for my taste. The croc slice, melt-in-my-mouth,

was more up my alley. However, there was enough booze and cheer to wash away any nitpicking.

Next morning, the gang embarked on a choppy wind-beaten and rainy catamaran ride for 40 minutes to Green Island, the gateway to the Great Barrier Reef. The shimmering blue-green expanse of the reef, a natural mass of singular reef systems embedded with gorgeous islands, is breathtaking. The older folks in our party weren't going to snorkel or swim, so we took a glass bottom boat tour where the translucent floor afforded a closer view of the Reef's diverse aquatic life. But its transcendent secrets only reveal themselves when you snorkel, like my sister and I did, agape as kaleidoscopic shoals of fish swam past us and over the green and orange-hued coral gardens.

Come morning, we made our way towards Townsville, four hours from Cairns, making two pit stops in between: the first at Murdering Point Winery on Mission Beach, a family-run boutique set-up where we tasted an assortment of tropical fruit wines, and the second at Vivia Cafe in Cardwell, where we wolfed down crab sandwiches. Crab sandwiches are ubiquitous in Cardwell and there a plethora of cafés hawking them along the coastline. Once we had scarfed down lunch though, the rest of the journey remained uninterrupted, with my parents occasionally dozing off like teenagers in the back of the vehicle, as vintage R.D. Burman songs filtered out of the stereo.

## TOWNSVILLE & MAGNETIC ISLAND

Uncle Ajit's housewarming dinner party in Townsville was a rambunctious family shindig. Between chomping on pickled salmon and pork sausages, and drinking wine, we mapped our plans for the next day. In the morning, Chahna and I made for Magnetic (Maggie in local lingo) Island, while the rest of the crew went croc-and-koala spotting at Billabong Sanctuary. A 20-minute ferry ride from Townsville, Maggie Island is in a secluded portion of the Great Barrier Reef. By the time we took the bus and hitched rides from locals to the island, we only had time enough to explore three of its seven



## THE DESTINATION

relatively untouched beaches. In Florence Bay, we snorkeled alongside a baby shark; in isolated Alma Bay, we sunbathed as if that slice of paradise were our own; and in Arthur Bay we spotted glowing corals in the calm, blue—and sometimes deceptively purple—waters. Although I didn't realise it then, Maggie Island, an ethereal idyll of shapely boulders and cuddly marsupials, wouldn't erase itself from my mind long after the trip.

The next morning, we hit the road again for Airlie Beach, three hours south of Townsville. In the serene beach town with a busy marina, most visitors hung out by The Lagoon, which was a large community pool in the heart of the town. By now, my sister and I were charting our own path, much like willful soloists in an orchestral symphony. So while the older members walked about the town window-shopping or cafe-hopping, we were content to laze around on a grassy patch near the ocean. I snuggled up with a copy of Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and soon snoozed off.

When the gang moved on from Airlie Beach to Mackay, our next stop, we had completed nearly a week on the road. I was experiencing the stirrings of monotony. The Queensland

scenery had begun to feel predictable; there was no getting away from the sugarcane fields—after all, 95 per cent of Australia's sugarcane is produced in the state. Instagramming through the countryside had also lost its appeal. At first the little t.n.-and-wooden houses seemed charming. However, painted in forlorn lifeless colours, the boxes no longer held my interest.

## MACKAY & BUNDABERG

At Mackay, our group was feeling the fatigue on account of our hectic one-night-one-town itinerary. Once again, we were using Mackay and Bundaberg, a town seven hours from Mackay, to sleep overnight. We decided to slow down our pace, making more halts along the way.

One of those happened to be at Lambert's Beach—15 minutes away from Mackay (coastal Queensland is strewn with virgin beaches) for whale watching. Somewhere along on the way, we purchased a giant live mud crab from an old lady who reared crabs by a pond next to her house. On reaching Gold Coast, we dined at Jimmys Kitchen, a Chinese restaurant run by a friend of Uncle Ajit's. Oh, and did I

Although I didn't realise it then, Magnetic Island, an ethereal idyll of shapely boulders and cuddly marsupials, wouldn't erase itself from my mind long after the trip was over



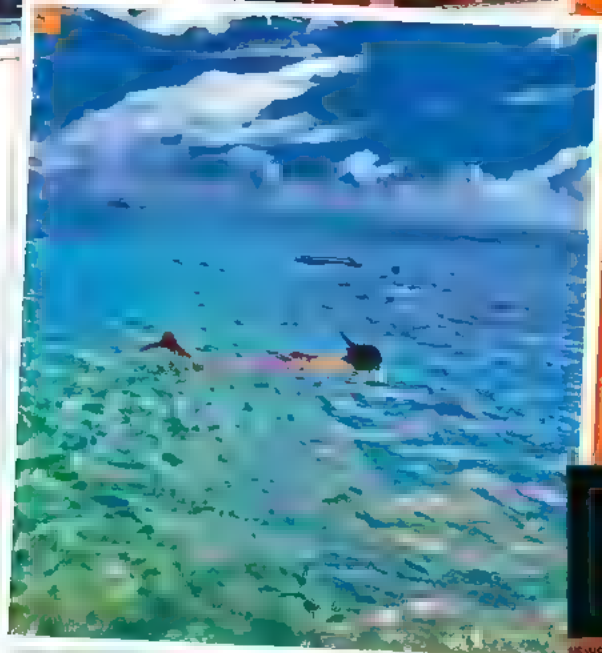
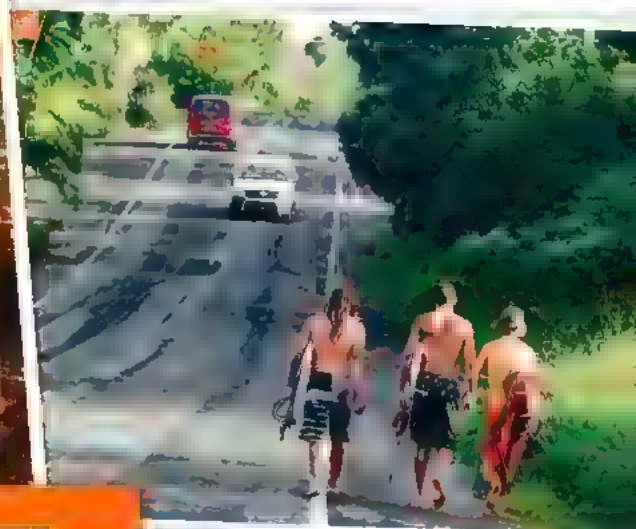
mention that the crustacean accompanied us to Gold Coast in an ice box?

The next evening in Bundaberg was purposefully eventless. Home to Australia's popular dark rum (the liquor and the city is often referred to as Bundy), it offers walks and rum-tasting experiences at its massive distillery, but our explorer personas had been worn out and we needed to unwind. So we did just that.

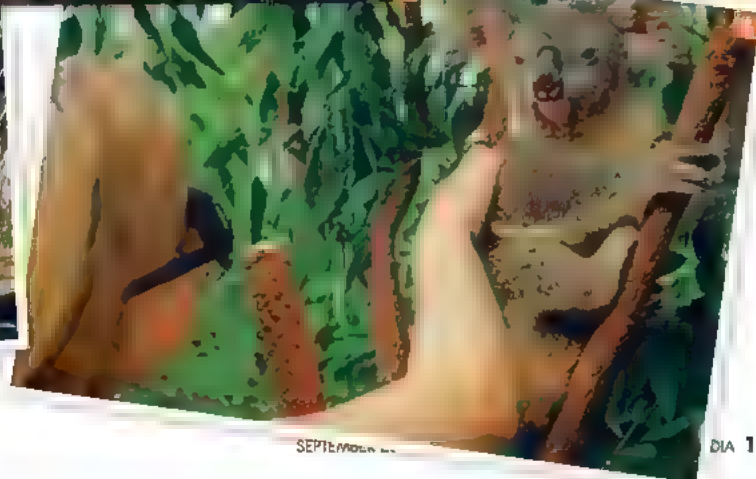
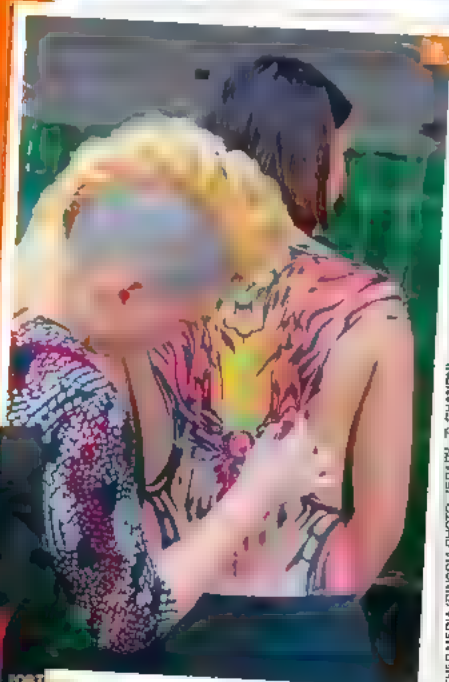
The morning after, we drove for three hours to reach Noosa, a 900-square-kilometre resort town along the Sunshine Coast that resembles the French Riviera. With high-end stores on either side of the street, extravagant restaurants and bars, white sandy beaches, and people dressed in high fashion. Noosa was unlike our previous stops. We spied a beach wedding that looked straight out the movies, a teenage fire-juggler busking on Laguna Bay, and canoodling couples.

## GOLD COAST & SURFERS PARADISE

Leaving Noosa behind, we headed into our final stretch. After driving for three hours, we reached Gold Coast for our last three days in Queensland. All this time spent gazing at pastoral panorama had whetted my appetite for the city's more familiar urban beats. Our 11th-floor rented service apartment on Main Beach had a delightful view of the blue-green ocean with white frothy waves gently rolling in and the glittering skyline. The winter chill had now set in, but we went swimming nevertheless. At this point, Chahna and I became a separate



- 1 Gold Coast offers both beachy fun and a frenetic nightlife
- 2 Byron Bay is backpacker central with surfers and busking musicians
- 3 The writer snorkels alongside baby sharks
- 4 Queensland's smaller towns have a laid-back, artistic vibe to them, with tattoo parlours, flea markets and hip cafés
- 5 Cairns, one of the gateways to the Great Barrier Reef, qualifies as a more touristy location than the rest of the state
- 6 At the Dainton Sanctuary in Townsville, crocodiles and koalas are popular sightings
- 7 Gondok Kingdom is a unique sex shop on Surfers Paradise in Gold Coast



DAVID WALTON/ALAMY/PICTURE  
DOULATRAMANI/ALAMY/PICTURE  
JOHANN/LOOK/PICTURE  
PIERRE OLIVIER SIKINE/PANTHER MEDIA/PICTURE  
CORSEST PROGET/IMAGEBROKER/PICTURE  
HEMIS/PICTURE  
CHANDON/PICTURE



party from the others, joined in our “young people” adventures by a good friend of mine from Sydney.

I was so ready to play the tourist, being offbeat be damned. So we took long walks along the beach and through the market in Surfers Paradise, ate a burrito at Guzman y Gomez, a famous eatery that serves Mexican cuisine, tasted bubble tea at Gong Cha and tried a martini with candy floss on top at House of Brews. On the morning of Day 2, we headed to Springbrook National Park, about 45 minutes from Gold Coast, and hiked along two trails for four hours. The first trail through the stunning Gondwana Rainforests is packed with canopies of myrtle beech and giant eucalyptus trees. We stood there like tiny blemishes on nature’s time-worn face, staring at the gushing waterfall with an unmistakable rainbow cutting right across its centre. The water was roaring, drowning our voices. The second trail, which is smaller but alluring, was in the Natural Bridge section of Springbrook where the force of water had cut through a part of a cave to form a bridge. Sunlight streaming in through the water formed a turquoise blue rock pool. Everything was so still yet throbbing with a cosmic connection that my friend and I spent 30 minutes here, meditating.

## BYRON BAY

On our last day, we visited the hippy town of Byron Bay, about an hour from Gold Coast. Byron is a backpacker’s dream with musicians busking in alleys splashed with graffiti and young children surfing. Hipster cafés and yoga centres abound, as do handmade garment stores selling shawls and crochet tops in pride colours, and artists painting out of caravans.

We meandered happily along the Cape Byron walking track that took us to the local lighthouse, the easterly point of mainland Australia, where dolphins are often spotted in the early hours of the morning. A drizzle had ruined any chances of us spotting them but Byron’s easygoing buzz was enough. After the euphoria and adrenaline of constant journeying, Byron was the sweet bookend we needed. I bid my friend goodbye, promising to return soon.

## HARMONY IN CACOPHONY

While our holiday had begun with the excitement of the unknown, we hadn’t considered that some things wouldn’t work in our favour. Half-way through this trip, I had begun

In my parents’ company, I learnt to slow down and not have a checklist of things to be done. They may not keep pace with Chahna and I, perhaps preferring to skip swimming around an island for something less demanding



Markets near Byron Bay hawk everything from crop tops in pride colours and nula hoops to kitschy knick-knacks

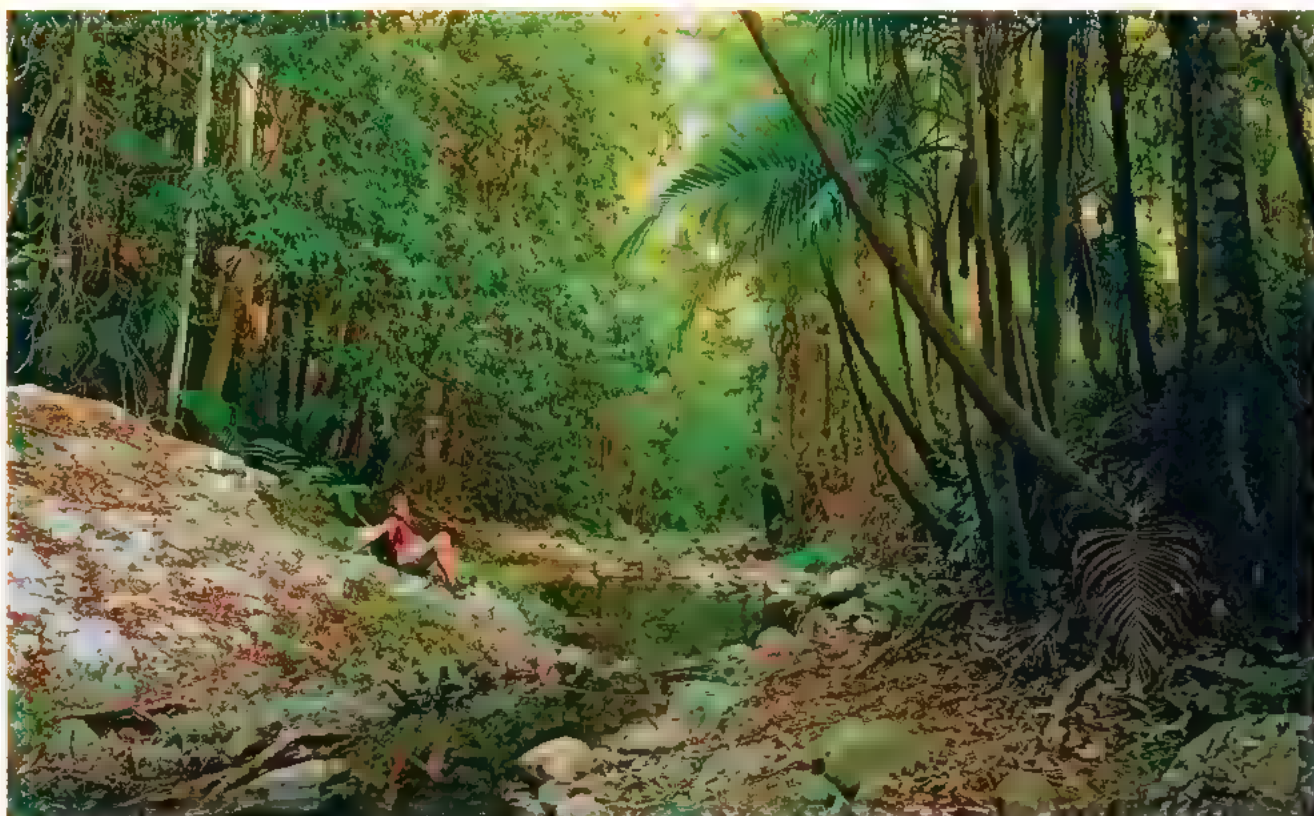
to skip the meat pies that I relished every morning. I am proud of being the gourmand, but eating Australian cuisine—barramundi, crabs, crocs and kangaroos—for days on end during lunch, breakfast and dinner had become tiresome.

My mother, true to a Sindhi mom, had loaded her suitcase with Indian food and I had taken to pilfering from that stash instead. Only at the beginning of our journey, we had quarreled like children over whether there was any need to pack so much Sindhi *lola* and *papad* when new flavours awaited us throughout Queensland. But here I was shamelessly embracing my inner desi.

Planning dinners had also become a raucous routine, where different members couldn’t agree on where to eat. I understood later, some things will go my way and some won’t. In my parents’ company, I learnt to slow down and not have a checklist of things to be done. They may not keep pace with Chahna and I, perhaps preferring to skip swimming around an island for something less demanding.

The older folks in our gang were cooler than I gave them credit for. “Happy Hours” had become an everyday affair with my folks, often at the expense of sightseeing. In between fleeting sips of vodka and sentimental bites of papad, I realise that it wasn’t as much about the spots we’d covered or missed as it was about each other’s company.

Queensland had gone past me in a flash and I was lucky that my parents had asked me to tag along with them. And despite my initial protests, the trove of Sindhi food in our extra suitcase was over. My mother knew what she was doing all along. ★



The Springbrook National Park (top) has two major trails, both of which take you deep into a forested wonderland; Airlie Beach (bottom), which has a marina, is a quiet seaside town ideal for ambling about.





THE DESTINATION

# OF HANDLEBARS AND HILLS

ON HIS FIRST TRYST WITH A HARLEY-  
DAVIDSON, A BIKER EXPERIENCES THE DIPS  
AND HIGHS OF THE CATALONIAN COUNTRYSIDE

BY SHAIL DESAI



SPAIN

The winding roads cutting through the Sant Llorenç del Munt i l'Obac Natural Park are flanked by grey rock faces and the occasional red monolith.



STYLING: JEFFREY M. HARRIS



## HAVING TAKEN MY HUMBLE BIKE THROUGH VARIOUS TERRAINS, FROM THE MOUNTAINS OF UTTARAKHAND IN EARLY SPRING WHEN

the snow is just melting, to the sandy landscape of Rajasthan and the Indo-Pak border, I consider myself a seasoned biker. So, on a rainy day in Mumbai in September last year, I signed up for what I thought would be the pinnacle of my riding experience. After all, it is not every day that a biker is asked if he'd like to ride a Harley-Davidson through the picturesque hills on the outskirts of Barcelona city. Keeping me company on this trip organised by Harley-Davidson would be seasoned riders who tested bikes for a living, all of us astride models of the bike to be launched next season. There was only one catch: I had no experience of riding a Harley. All the kilometres I'd endured so far were on the pockmarked roads of India, on a bike with the temperament of a girlfriend I've wanted to break up with time and again. My plan now was to tail the seasoned bikers and make most of the experience.

For decades, Harley-Davidson has been a symbol of royalty in the world of biking. Even before the brand entered the

Indian market, the bikes were well known for their rumble and the attention they demanded on the road. And this reputation—along with the fact that it is many a biker's dream ride—was one of the biggest reasons I made the trip. Of course, there were also the sights of Spain.

Three weeks after that rainy morning, I was in the Catalan region of Spain, interacting with the veterans at my hotel bar in Seva, a municipality in Barcelona province about 60 kilometres north of Barcelona city. The clean hilly air of the opulent region drew people here and what was once home to a few pastoralists is now a neighbourhood of plush mansions. The conversation at the bar revolved mostly around riding at breakneck speeds, and I realised that I was probably the only newbie as I hurriedly gulped down my rum and Coke. It was time for a crash course on Harley-Davidson basics, which was accomplished by a

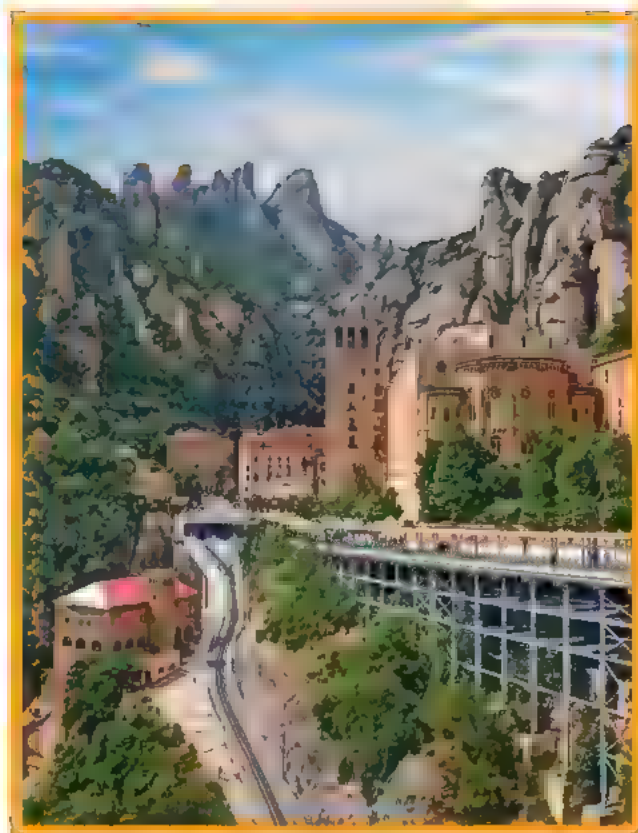
The largely pastoral towns and villages of Catalonia, such as Tona, are often characterised by quaint stone-walled homes with sloping roofs.



GIORGIO LOVATI/GETTYSTOCK







A statue of Alex Crivillé (left), the 1999 world champion of the 500cc MotoGP stands on a roundabout near Seva. Founded in the 11th century the Santa Maria de Montserrat located in the famous mountains of Montserrat is a functional monastery with over 70 monks in residence

simply sat back and let the wind take over. It gave me time to look around and smell the grass instead of the exhaust from the bike ahead.

As we headed to the next big town, Moià, the bucolic landscape unfolded in front of us: lush pastures where cattle grazed disinterestedly as our bikes stormed past. We grabbed the attention of a few locals momentarily, until they continued ambling down the street or returned to their newspaper and espresso at the sleepy, wayside cafés.

By now, I was at ease; the unmatched riding pleasure came as a pleasant surprise. The black surface of the road was fit for a game of bowling, even as signboards with snowflakes warned of slippery conditions in the winter. The road discipline was impeccable—neither did the car behind me attempt to overtake in haste, nor was that multi-axle lorry jumping the line at the blind turns.

Far ahead, a spire indicated the presence of civilisation, rising from the centre like an authority among the gathering. The town of Moià, home to Rafael Casanova, the commander of Catalonia during the 18th-century Siege of Barcelona, blended in perfectly with its surroundings. We rode past old and new structures of homes, cafés and shops on the main street, taking in the stone walls and tiled roofs that are all so uniform that it seemed like they had grown up together. This was the heart of Catalonia, and the spirit of the Catalan independence referendum was strong here. Flags and banners that read 'Sí' or 'Yes,' in support of the movement, hung

outside homes and farms. These agricultural towns were a far cry from the tourist hotchpotch that is Barcelona.

As if to break the monotony of the spectacular scenery of the countryside, the stench of cow dung overpowered our senses. But most times, it was the sweet smell of the mountain air. I felt a smile inch its way up my face for the first time; and while the carefree riding was definitely a liberating experience, certain spots along the way called for a moment off the saddle—in silence amid this wonderland.

The last of civilisation soon disappeared as the route climbed under a canopy of cork oak trees that stood like guards of honour for the entourage, while pine forests laid out a thick carpet of green that hugged the hilltops. In the distance towered the white cliffs of Montserrat, a site of great historical importance to Catalonia. The statue of Black Madonna, the patron saint of Catalonia, stands here at a height of about 4,055 feet, the highest point of the region. The wooden sculpture is believed to have been carved in Jerusalem and draws thousands of believers each day.

It was afternoon and we had covered about 60 kilometres before we stopped for lunch at a quaint café in the village of Monistrol de Calders. We had meat cannelloni and traditional Catalan *butifarra* sausages along with a *crema catalana*—a creamy custard, much like a *crème brûlée*—for dessert. We washed down the meal and our drowsiness with a flavourful cup of coffee, before riding back to Seva. This time I was on a Breakout, a stark contrast to the Heritage due

to its elongated frame that stretched every muscle. En route, just before entering Seva, I stopped for a photograph with the installation of Àlex Crivillé, the 1999 world champion of the 500cc MotoGP, which stood in the middle of a roundabout. He too seemed to be smiling, pleased with my maiden tryst. Even before I could get off the mount on arrival, a cold beer was presented by the crew—just the way it's done.

**T**here was a sense of anticipation when I arose the following morning to go the distance again. This time, I was pumped to hit the road, just like the rest.

The day started out on a Street Bob cruiser—its curvy handlebars telling me that initial distance would probably be a lesson in manoeuvring. But it was a smooth transition.

After few kilometres on the same route as the day before, we ventured into the heart of the Sant Llorenç del Munt i l'Obac Natural Park, a nature reserve named after two massifs, Sant Llorenç del Munt and Serra de l'Obac, that dominate the landscape. The cover of oak and pine trees dwindled as we climbed the sloping roads, eventually giving way to grey rock faces interspersed with the odd red monolith. I was hoping to spot few of the famous foxes that are known to boss the area in search of a quick meal of rabbit or badger.

The foxes remained elusive, and other vehicles remained few and far in between. Cyclists emerged every now and then, with flushed cheeks and spent lungs on the uphill. The sound of our bikes reverberated in places where the road was cut through the mountainside. There was hardly a straight stretch, and we were constantly leaning to make each turn.

Taking a breather at the highest point of our route—at

about 1,650 feet—gave us a bird's-eye view of the region. The green hills of the reserve dotted with grey and white rock faces stretched out almost as far as the eyes could see. The flats of the dipping valleys broke the monotone with images of civilisation—bales of hay bundled into giant balls, and the sloping roofs of barns. Above us eagles sailed the skies, surveying the domain in search of their next meal, even as we celebrated with Queens of the Stone Age grooving on the stereo of the pilot rider's hulking Street Glide Special.

We descended back to the café in Monistrol de Calders for a lunch of *fideuà*, a paella-like dish made with pasta noodles. Now, I had a bigger appetite to hit the road again, this time on the last bike I was to ride in this journey—the Fat Bob.

"You're going to love this one, my personal favourite," Frank said as I walked to my ride.

A Harley veteran's word can be either encouraging or alarming for a newbie like me. But the moment I fired up, I knew this was going to be a sweet ride. The riding posture, the response on the sharp turns of the mountain roads—I was finally close to feeling the way I thought the other riders must have through the journey. This time, I kept pace—with Frank, and at the back of the pack as usual.

About 100 kilometres later, as I downed yet another end-of-the-road cold beer, I wished the two days of riding hadn't come to an end yet. I had spent over 360 kilometres on the road in the most charming setting I'd ever seen—so close to civilisation yet so far from it. With the weather holding up, and all the riders holding true to the rules, Barcelona had been an ideal backdrop for a dream ride in the hills. And it couldn't get sweeter than a Harley ♦



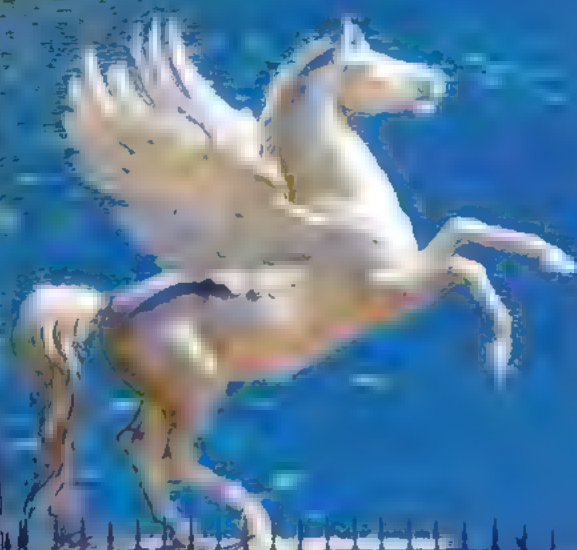
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# RIDING ON THE LUCK OF THE IRISH

A week-long drive along the picturesque Coastal Causeway Route of the Irish coast from Belfast, Northern Ireland, to Dublin, Ireland, leads to baronial castles, poetry and fierce foxhounds

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY KOUNTEYA SINHA



## NORTHERN IRELAND AND IRELAND

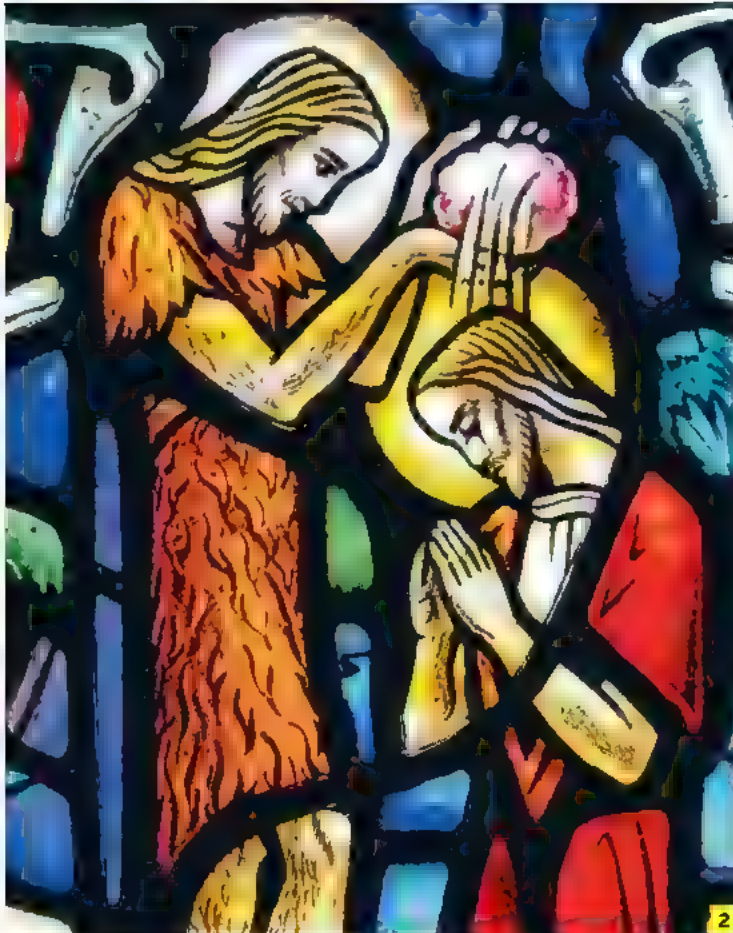
Along the route from the historic walled city of Derry (officially Londonderry) to Dublin are several stops steeped in Irish history, from quaint pubs to the grand Powerscourt Estate in Enniskerry, Wicklow. Among the notable features of the estate are its gardens, voted one of top 10 most beautiful gardens in the world by *National Geographic*. Along with beautiful flowers, they also have a collection of art such as the William Gibson's "Winged Horses" overlooking Triton Lake.



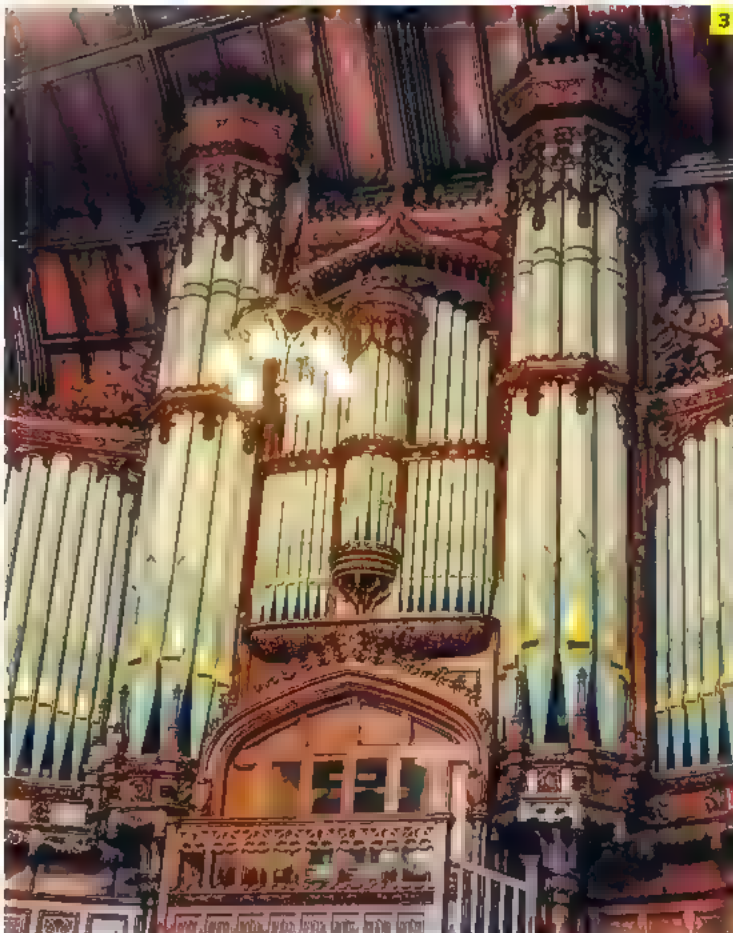








The awe-inducing Coastal Causeway Route technically begins in Belfast. The birthplace of R.M.S *Titanic* is known for its significant political murals, the city also sports vibrant street art such as "The Face" by Kevin Killen (4), part of the "If Walls Could Talk" project. The installation depicts a face, made of smaller images themed around Belfast's industrial heritage. About half an hour's drive away north of Belfast, the Nine Glens of Antrim—undulating green valleys stretching out to the North Atlantic coast—unfold. In County Antrim, the Dark Hedges (1), an avenue of beech trees along Bregagh Road, is one of Northern Ireland's most photographed spots—and features as the King's Road in the *Game of Thrones*. Passing underneath the canopy that hides sunlight can be quite eerie. In fact, local lore says a mystical grey lady—the ghost of the daughter of James Stuart, who planted the trees over 300 years ago—glides through the grove and disappears beyond the last tree. Built in 1887, the neo-Gothic Guildhall in Northern Ireland's second biggest city, Derry, about an hour away, is the only surviving guildhall still in civic use in Ireland. Apart from the 23 striking stained glass windows (2), a prominent feature here is the Guildhall organ (3), considered one of England's finest. First installed in 1891, it was rebuilt along with the Guildhall after both were destroyed, first in a fire in 1908, and then by bombs in 1972. After a full reconstruction worth £68,000 in 1978, it was refurbished and installed again in 2015 after restoration workers damaged it.









2

East of Belfast's bustle lies the baronial Stormont Castle (3). The Northern Ireland Parliament bought this architectural landmark for £21,000 in 1921 as a home for the region's first prime minister. Today, it has the offices of the first ministers and is the venue for debates on administrative policies. For kilometres—especially around the Antrim Coast—Coastal Causeway Route's winding roads hug the craggy Irish shore of green-tilted cliffs and crashing waves, before passing by postcard-pretty villages. Along this route, the 100-foot-high Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge (1), which connects Carrick-a-Rede island to mainland Northern Ireland, is a popular stop. One can spot dolphins, basking sharks and porpoises in the surrounding North Atlantic waters. Though uninhabited, Carrick-a-Rede was a prime salmon fishing destination for over 400 years, and the bridge was built by fishermen in 1755. In the village of Bushmill, is the Old Bushmills Distillery (2), Ireland's oldest licensed distillery (registered in 1784). It has been destroyed in a fire, billeted Allied armed forces, and hosted music festivals but has not changed the recipe of its whiskeys till date. A detour through Kilkenny towards Dublin leads to one of Ireland's most beautiful grounds, Mount Juliet Estate. Once home to the Earls of Carrick, it passed on to Dermot McCalmont—known for his prized racehorse The Tetrarch—in 1902. He was also interested in fox-hunting, and foxhounds (4) have been kennelled here since the early 1900s.



3

4







Amid the brightly coloured barns and homes of the Irish countryside, one can sometimes spot the rare Argentinian Falabella pony—there are only about 2,500 registered worldwide. Rarely growing over 2.5 feet in height, these genial and easily trained miniature horses make for good therapy animals (top). Perhaps the most famous pit stop along the Coastal Causeway Route is Northern Ireland's only UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Giant's Causeway (bottom). About 40,000 basalt columns mark this dramatic landscape, which is a geological wonder formed about 60 million years ago. Bollywood buffs may recognise the landscape from a song sequence in Shah Rukh Khan-starrer *Dilwale* (2015). ♦

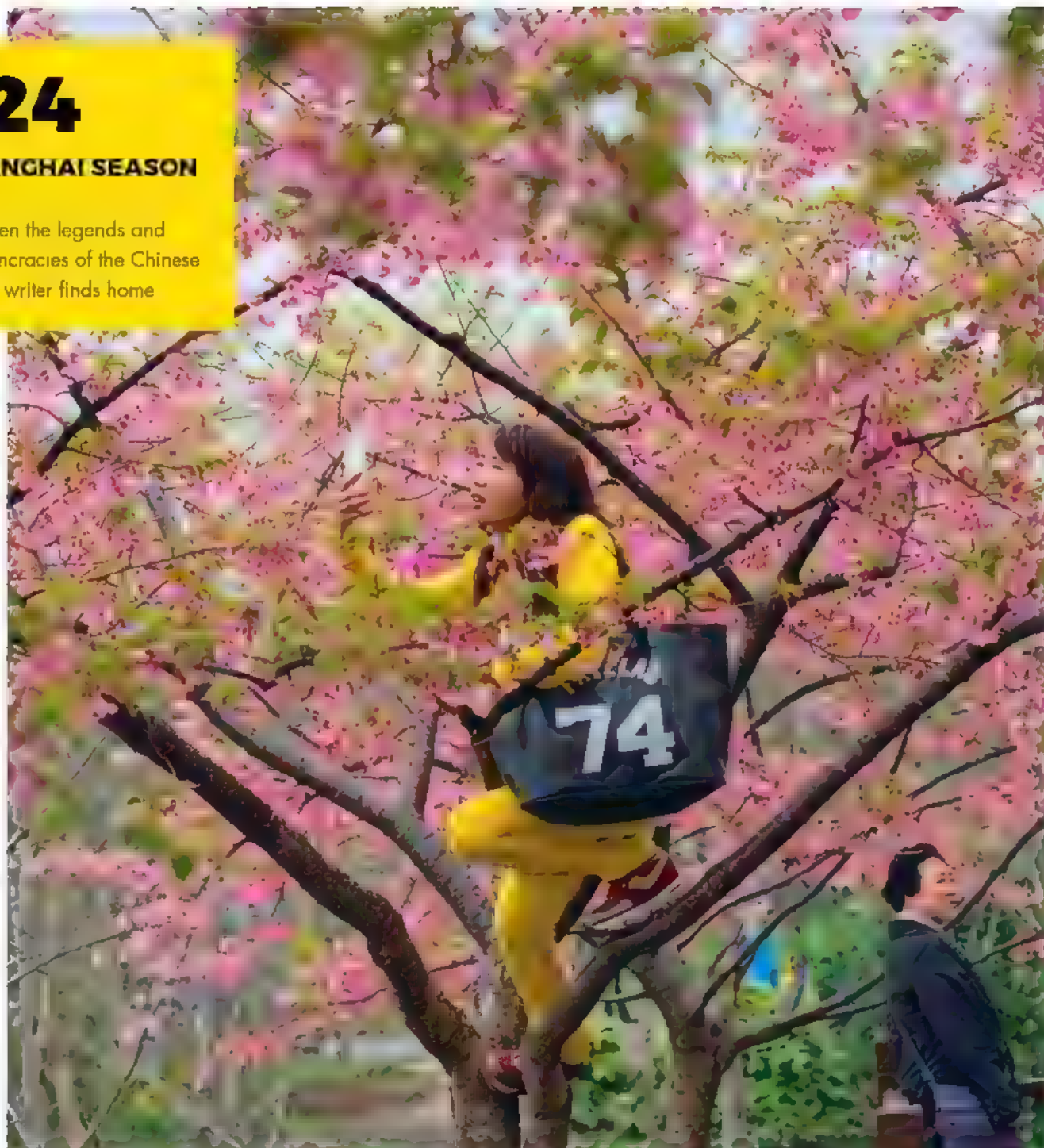


# THE JOURNEY

**124**

## SHANGHAI SEASON

Between the legends and idiosyncracies of the Chinese city, a writer finds home



JOHANNES EISELE/STAFF/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

CHANCE ENCOUNTERS ON HIMACHAL'S MIYAR VALLEY TREK





# SHAN

## SEASON





# FOR SIX MONTHS, A WRITER IS TRANSPLANTED TO SHANGHAI, A CITY OF CULTURE AND CONTRAST. BETWEEN ITS LEGENDS AND IDIOSYNCRACIES, SHE FINDS HOME

By Paloma Dutta

I came to Shanghai in late January 2018 to join my partner who had a year-long fellowship at one of the universities in the city. I would spend six months—a timeline that ensured I did not have to stick to a mad-dash itinerary, but adopt a quick enough pace to absorb and assimilate as much of the fantastic new culture that awaited at my doorstep.

If Beijing weighs you down with history, Shanghai uplifts you with its futuristic towers and bright lights. But a longer stay tells you it is also a city of changing seasons, each creating enough spectacle until the next one. A few days after I reached Shanghai, what started as a soft flake shower gathered into a snowstorm transforming the city into a twinkly winter paradise; rust-yellow rooves of gazebos and temples that point heavenwards at the corners had turned pristine white. By March, the snow melted without a trace in our imagination as the cityscape, especially huge garden spaces like Gucun Park and Shanghai Botanical Garden, transitioned from rows of dry silhouette-like trees to create canopies of cherry, peach and plum blossoms. The rains washed off the heady smell of the fruity flowers within a couple of weeks; the leafy phoenix trees which line the French Concession avenues of Shanghai, the regal magnolias, the tall-stemmed lotuses in the ponds and rivers that appear with the rains and keep beat with the shrilly crickets were going to see us through summer. Although one does not visit Shanghai to witness nature, it offers a beautiful backdrop to experience the rest of the city.

One of my first memories of Shanghai is of people walking around the streets with suitcases. The phenomenon is

called *chunyun*, Spring Festival travel. During this time, one of the most populated cities in the world sees its migrant workers return to their hometowns and villages to celebrate the Chinese New Year. The month around this lunar festival—this year it was on February 16—witnesses one of the largest annual human migrations in the world and is considered to be the worst time to travel around China because of overflowing traffic, especially road and rail. Serpentine queues outside the otherwise orderly and large railways stations, entire families—with their luggage—travelling long distances on two wheelers are common sights during this period.

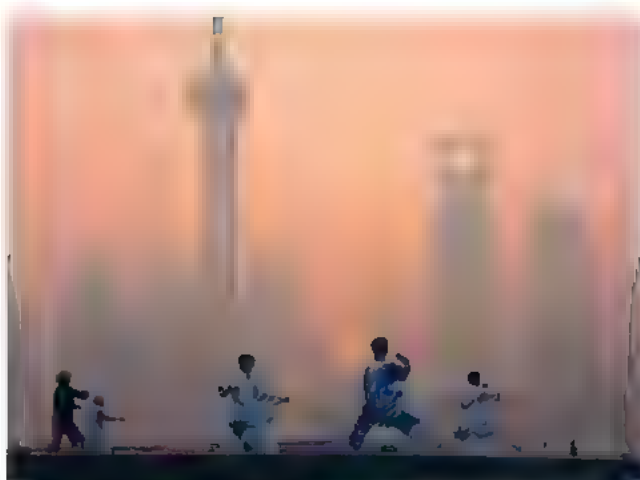
But it is one of the better times to experience Shanghai. The deserted streets lined with brightly lit lanterns, or huge statuesque ones—they commemorated the year of the dog this year—are a feast for the eyes and spectacular showcasing of Chinese aesthetics. The Yu Garden, an overtly traditional space with only Chinese architecture—Shanghai on a short visit will drastically fail to hold up any Chinatown stereotype, or Hollywood imagination of China—is the best place to experience the month-long Lantern Festival. Walking through

**“IF BEIJING WEIGHS YOU DOWN WITH HISTORY, SHANGHAI UPLIFTS YOU WITH ITS FUTURISTIC TOWERS AND BRIGHT LIGHTS**

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GRANT FANT/PHOTOLIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES



the zigzag bridge over the lake (made so because it is believed that ghosts can only navigate straight pathways) with floating and hanging lanterns displaying ancient poems, and larger-than-life dragon boats on either side is a trip down fairyland

On the chilly night of February 15, my partner and I stood outside the Jade Buddha Temple, hoping to experience a Chinese midnight celebration. But we welcomed the new year braving a steady downpour in a long ticket queue; it was to be a couple of hours before our turn came to go in, way past midnight. But once inside, the fatigue and cold vanished as we looked on at the lively scene of hundreds of devotees seeking blessings for the coming year at that late/early hour. We too bent in prayer, lighting incense sticks and voicing our own hopes and fears in silent chants in the many halls containing

In addition to the cultural relics it holds, the traditional architectural style of the Jade Buddha Temple (facing page) makes it a unique destination in a thoroughly modern city: Tai chi (top) is a martial art form practised both for defence and to inculcate mindfulness: The Shanghaiese witness a wide variety of flowers throughout the year. May-June bring in the lavender fields (bottom).

Buddha statues, including two white jade Buddhas, one recumbent and the other sitting, both looking on benignly at the praying throng. Entering the temple past the regular opening hours (it shuts for tourists at 4.30 p.m.), in a space alit with myriad candles, their flames hazy in the smoke from cauldrons burning incense, was well worth our vigil.

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**A**ll the giant panda videos on social media meant that I found my way to the Shanghai Zoo soon after landing in the city. To see frolicking pandas is adorable but to watch them eat is therapeutic. One sat down and stuffed his face with leaves, sticks, everything, while the other lay on his back, carefully broke out the sticks from the main branch, held them in a neat bundle and then stuffed his face, almost rolling off the platform while at it. The food coma they went into after going through a mountain of bamboo shoot—one lay on his belly as if sunning himself at the beach and the other curled up as if in front of a fire—got us sleepy-eyed as well.

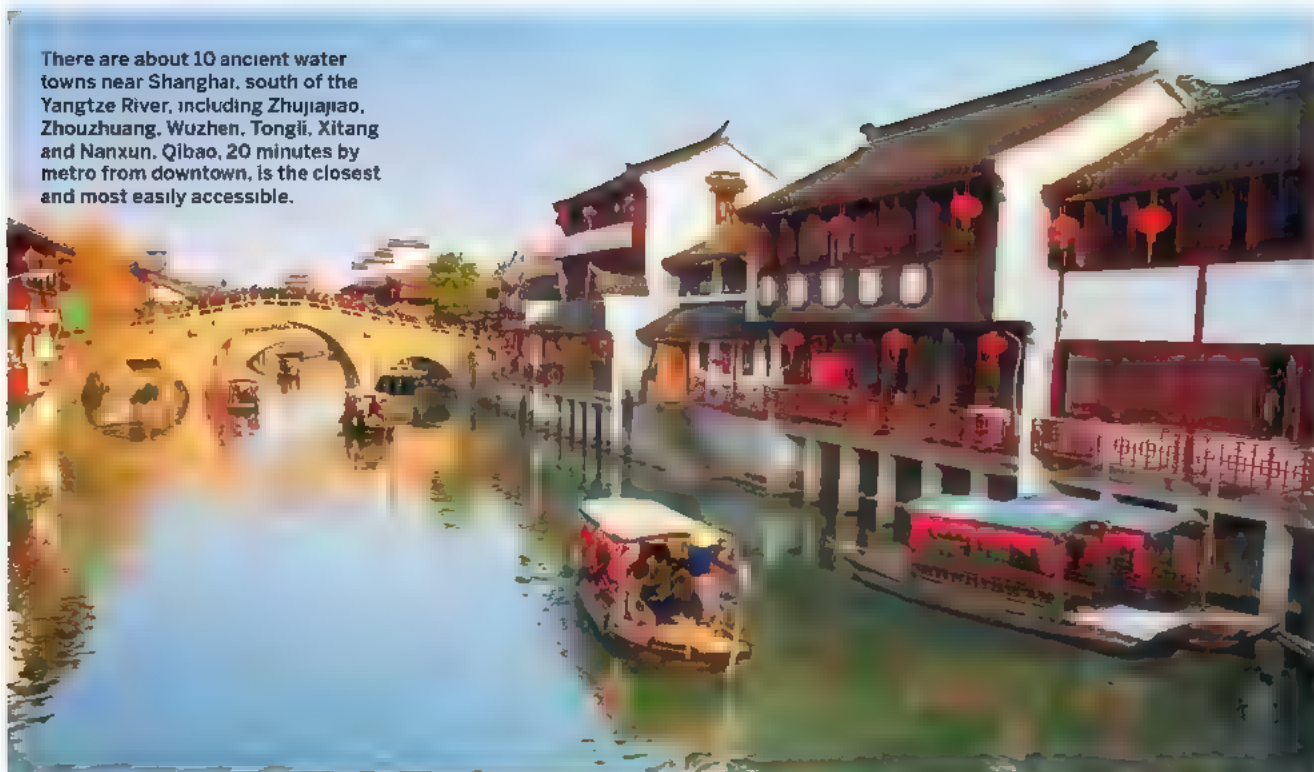
In a modern metropolis like Shanghai, one is constantly on the lookout for the traditional which often peeks out in public spaces during a casual saunter



KEREN SU/CORBIS DOCUMENTARY/GETTY IMAGES 714 JOHANNES EISEL/AFPA/GETTY IMAGES 714



There are about 10 ancient water towns near Shanghai, south of the Yangtze River, including Zhujiajiao, Zhouzhuang, Wuzhen, Tongli, Xitang and Nanxun. Qibao, 20 minutes by metro from downtown, is the closest and most easily accessible.



around town. At dusk, as the lights come on, 'dancing grannies' take over street squares in every neighbourhood in droves. Square dancing, popular among middle-aged and retired women, affectionately called *dama*, started as an exercise regime set to pop music to keep them healthy, and occupied. But with time millions of bopping *dama* have started participating in competitions, and neighbourhood groups now invest exorbitant sums in matching costumes, choreographers and sound systems, creating a booming industry. I have walked past many groups swaying to Bollywood numbers, maybe to add some foreign flavour and gain an edge over the competition.

Other public spaces, like the People's Park in Haungpu district, a 25-acre green area dotted with lotus ponds, become hosting grounds for marriage markets on weekends. Marriages are negotiated over and fixed by parents of both genders who sit with umbrellas in front of them on which they pin their child's vital information—age, occupation, income, educational background—for other parents and match-makers to inspect. It is discouraged to take photos, as I found out the hard way

when a few hard pats fell on my back and continued till I put the camera away.

The meditative martial art form, *tai chi*, is also practised in Shanghai's parks by the older generation with hypnotic grace. I found my way to a trial class in the city with a large expat population looking for a crash course to inculcate Chinese mindfulness. The instructor, with a good smattering of English, would come to me now and then, not to break the Zen-like trance created by the slow fluid movements, but to tell me a bit about the different forms the class was practicing that day. In one such form, she asked me to visualise a scene where my hands were to trace the movements of water as if rolling down

## “AT DUSK, ‘DANCING GRANNIES’ TAKE OVER STREET SQUARES IN EVERY NEIGHBOURHOOD

”

one's body. I was told that when I move my hands to the right I should stand on my right foot, and do the same for the other side. I nodded wisely and took on a stork like posture. But even with my half-shut eyelids I could sense that nobody else in the class was on one leg. Taking this to be a beginner lesson I hopped from right leg to left leg with the grace of a sumo wrestler. The instructor let me continue for five minutes before she came and corrected herself—what she meant by standing on one leg was that I was to shift my body weight to that leg. Not enact a stork's mating dance. A lot gets lost in translation in China.

Having a vegan partner ensured that some of the first Chinese words we had to learn apart from the usual greetings were names of vegetables. *Dofu* (tofu), *mogu* (mushroom),



*bo cai* (spinach) were thrown about often without success because of the tonality of the Chinese language. Very few restaurants have English menus and the Chinese get very amused when they see us poring over paper menus or overhead boards with our phone cameras where an app throws up English translations of the items on the screen. Sometimes the literal translation can be quite an appetite killer; curiously, 'belly hair' comes up quite often. Shanghai has a vibrant street food scene; where translation apps fail, I find that the universal language of pointing out the food or ingredients I want always works. My favourite street corner snack, stacked in towering bamboo caskets, is the *baozi*, a steamed bun with pork or spinach-and-mushroom fillings. For a finer, but affordable dining experience, Shanghai also boasts of the world's cheapest restaurant with two Michelin stars, Canton 8. The creative baked stuffed crab shell or the beautifully crispy bean curd rolls give you bragging rights without burning a hole in your pocket.

Every time friends and family visit Shanghai, I take them along my favourite route—a brisk walk down East Nanjing Pedestrian Road, one of the busiest shopping streets in the world. Las Vegas-like, with giant illuminated Chinese calligraphy, minus the casinos, it opens up to the Bund, the

Nanjing Road is one of the world's longest shopping streets and the pedestrianised East Nanjing Road (top) is a good point to start one's exploration of Shanghai: Dancing *dama* groups (bottom left) add vibrance to the city's public spaces; On an average the giant panda (bottom middle) consumes as much as 9 to 14 kilos of bamboo shoots a day; The Jade Buddha Temple (bottom right) is one of Shanghai's top attractions.

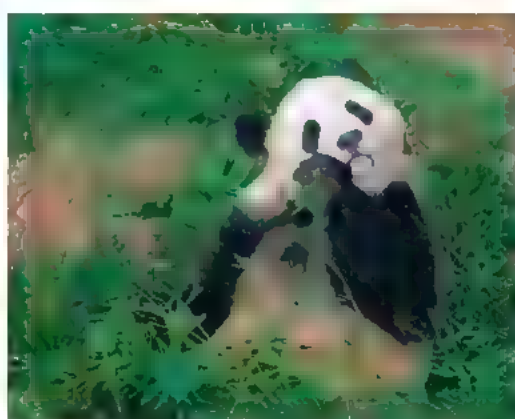
Huangpu riverfront. The dazzling Shanghai skyline, with its the colour-changing Oriental Pearl Tower, the quirky 'bottle opener' (Shanghai World Financial Centre), the 'corkscrew' (Shanghai Tower), and the stately Jinmao Tower with its pagoda-inspired top—they all hold your gaze awhile, and force you to look into the future even as you hop on to the ferry to cross over to the other side and glance at the British-era neoclassical buildings. We soon leave history behind, for another peek into the future up on the Lujiajui skywalk, watching the towers within touching distance. The process of assimilating with a new culture is gradual and it is presumptuous to even imagine oneself as an insider in a brief six-month period. But as I see the lights reflect off their eyes while they bend a little backwards to take in the gargantuan structures, mine sparkle with a tinge of borrowed pride.

## Essentials

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

There are direct flights between Delhi and Shanghai, flights from Mumbai require at least one stop at a gateway city like Hong Kong, Bangkok, or Singapore. A single-entry one-month tourist visa to China costs ₹3,900, and requires visitors to submit their itinerary, round trip air tickets, and proof of hotel reservations, or provide an invitation letter.

Shanghai's metro system is cheap and easy to use. Taxis are reasonably cheap and quite accurate, but drivers generally don't know English, so do collect "name cards" from hotels, restaurants, bars, and people to show the driver your destination in Chinese print.



THANAT SASIPATANAPORN/SHUTTERSTOCK, JANE HUI/JOHN LONELY PLANET IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES, DANIEL KUSE/SHUTTERSTOCK, BOB D'AMICO/JOHN LONELY PLANET IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES, TONY HUI/JOHN LONELY PLANET IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES







THE JOURNEY

# SWEET VALLEY HIGH

The Miyar Valley trek in Himachal Pradesh is a rare Himalayan trek that traverses flat alpine meadows, not mountains. Its joy lies in chance encounters with Gaddi pastoralists, the misty landscapes, and breaking bread with locals.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAYANK SONI



The week-long Miyar Valley trek is a secret that Himachal keeps close to its heart. It starts at the village of Shukto in western Lahaul-Spiti, with the Zaskar range looming in the distance. The moderate trek ends at the bottom of the Miyar Glacier at Kesarjyong Chu—the seven pools sacred to the Buddhist locals of the valley.







The semi-nomadic Gaddi shepherds are the true explorers of this region. Travelling great distances in search of pastures, these hardy folk migrate to Miyar in the summer and leave before winter. The Miyar Valley trek isn't complete without sighting hundreds of sheep every now and then, grazing under the watchful eyes of the pastoralists. Dharamchand Thakur (top) was 12 when he first came here with his father. It has been 35 years since. Today, he and two others look after a flock of 400 sheep.

A group of 10 horses (bottom) hired from Shukto carried the load for us five trekkers. We'd encounter at least three nullahs every day, and while we crossed them with the help of rickety wooden planks for bridges, the animals expertly navigated their swift currents.







Miyar means "valley of flowers" in local parlance and true to its name, the region is carpeted in yellow dandelions and Himalayan geraniums between July and September. However, it is the dainty Himalayan blue poppy (top right), peeping out from rocky outcrops, that looks most fetching. When it comes to Miyar's fauna, the grey-hooded warbler (top left), a swift, tough-to-photograph creature, turns heads with its canary-yellow underparts.

At Khanjar (bottom), a village of about 10 homes that trekkers pass en route to Kesariyong Chu, locals make the most of the pleasant day temperatures, taking their chores outside, chopping green vegetables which are then dried and stocked for the winter.

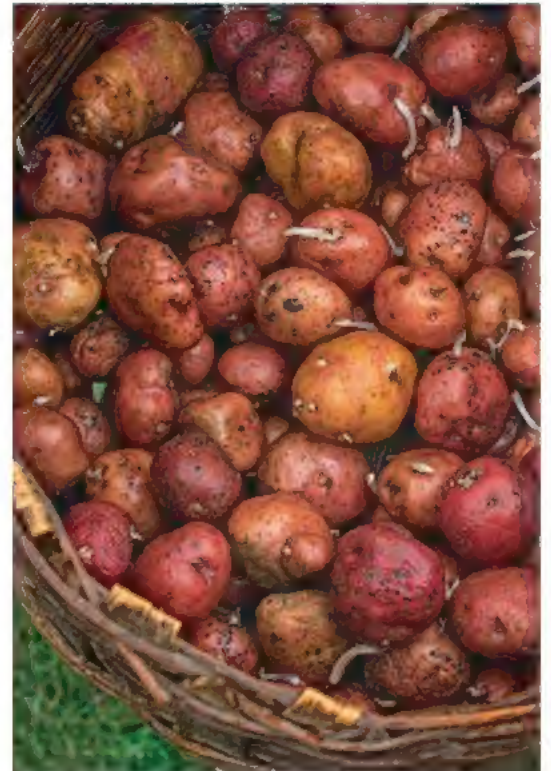




## THE JOURNEY

Come festivities and special family occasions, and the aroma of sweetish bread and *sewaiyan* (a sweet dish of vermicelli cooked in milk) (top left) wafts from homes in the Miyar Valley. Though potato (top right) and barley are widely grown across the region, it is green peas that fetch locals a good price and are most commonly cultivated here.

With shrinking grazing grounds and fewer hands to manage, the flock size (bottom) of the Gaddis has reduced over time. Several pastoralists we encountered on the trek reminisced how until two decades ago, a group of two or three shepherds easily tended to a thousand goats and sheep. These days, the number has halved.







While ending the trek at the seven sacred pools feels like a feat worth celebrating, it is the stunning landscapes peppered along the way—hills shrouded in mist, casting flawless reflections in lakes—that tug at trekkers' hearts (top).

The modest shelters of the Gaddis are made of stone, and passed down over several generations. Sanjay Thakur (bottom) lives in one built by his great-grandfather. 🌟



# TRAVEL QUIZ

TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ



THIS 2004 HOLLYWOOD FILM  
FOLLOWS ERNESTO 'CHE'  
GUEVARA ON A ROAD TRIP  
THROUGH SOUTH AMERICA.



THE NAME OF THIS VERY  
POPULAR PASS IN NORTH  
INDIA TRANSLATES TO  
'GROUND OF CORPSES.'



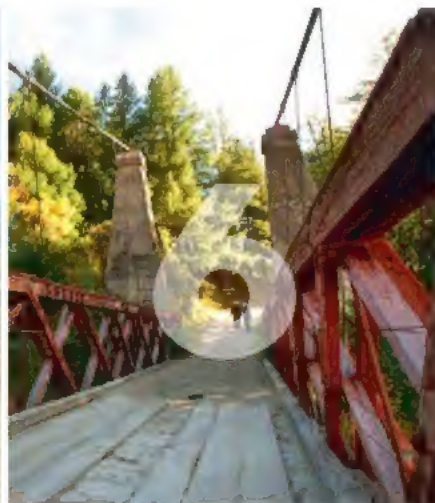
IF YOU PULLED INTO THE ICONIC  
DRIVE-IN THEATRE ALONG THE  
HISTORIC ROUTE 66, WHERE IN  
U.S.A. WOULD YOU BE?



WHICH PRIMARILY TWO-  
LANE ROAD, COVERED IN 16  
HOURS WITHOUT A BREAK,  
CIRCUMNAVIGATES ICELAND?



WHERE IS THE 850-KILOMETRE-  
LONG ROUTE 62, CONSIDERED  
THE WORLD'S LONGEST WINE  
ROUTE, LOCATED?



IN NEW ZEALAND, YOU CAN  
OFF-ROAD ALONG THIS ROUTE,  
WHICH WAS HAND-HACKED  
DURING THE GOLD RUSH.

ANSWERS 1. THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES 2. ROHTANG 3. CARTHAGE IN JASPER COUNTY, MISSOURI 4. ICELAND RING ROAD OR ROUTE 1 5. SOUTH AFRICA 6. SKIPPER'S ROAD

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